VOLUME TWO

DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE

TO ROLEPLAYING



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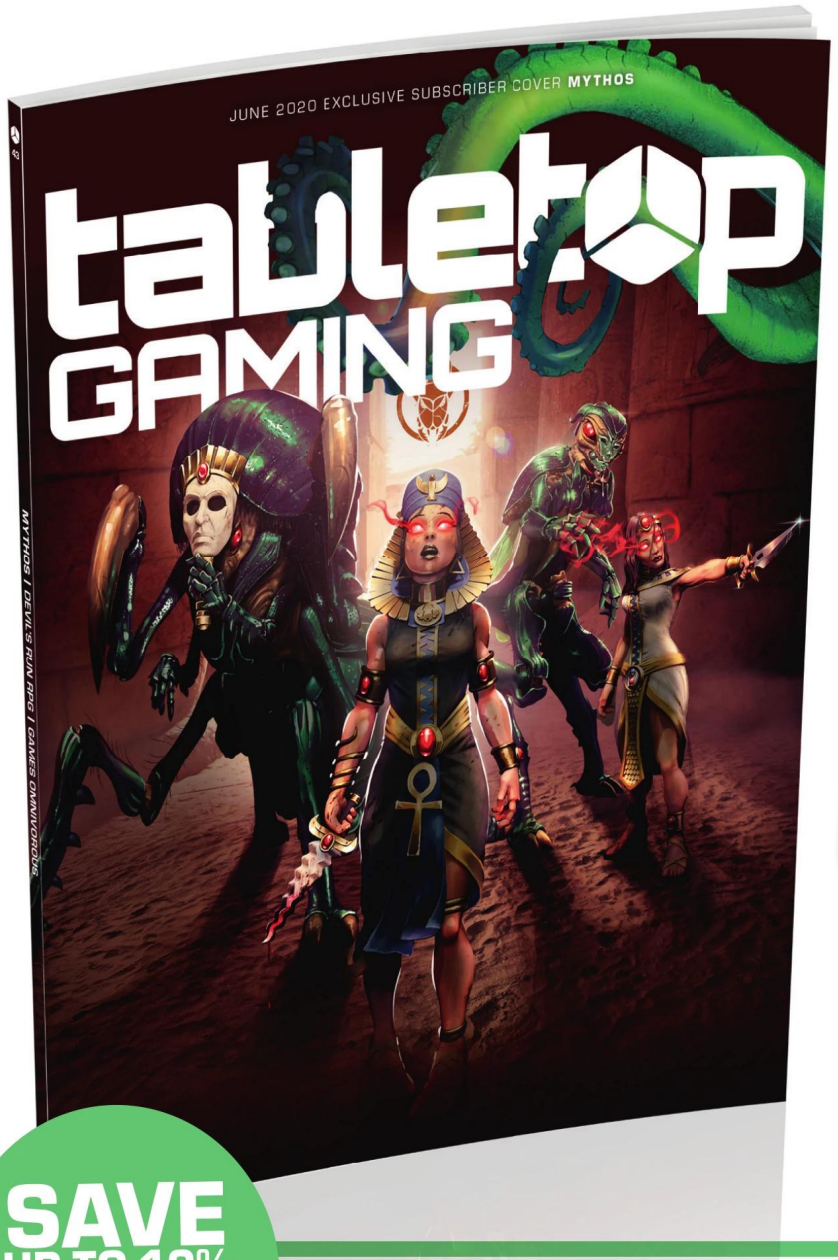

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Welcome



Welcome to Volume Two of the Dungeon Master's Guide to Roleplaying. Well done, you made it, and you probably levelled up or lost your sanity along the way. Either way it was fun, and we have even more ahead.

Volume Two takes us to some strange places, whether that's to the apocalyptic world of *MÖRK BORG*, deadly space in *Alien: The Roleplaying Game,* or simply down to the, let's be honest, most vicious world of *Root: The Role-playing Game.* We also have a huge feature on *Dungeon & Dragon's Descent into Avernus* – a trip to hell via the much-loved Baldur's Gate.

Plus, we have reviews from as far flung as *Star Trek, Genesys, Vampire: The Masquerade,* and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* as well as many more. If you're looking round for your next world to explore, you're in the right place.

And of course, we offer you the finest advice to running your RPG campaigns – from the extremely difficult 'making your character voices sounds good and interesting' to vital guidance on creating interesting character names and the most important part of any campaign play: the recap.

So, with this recap out of the way, it's time to dust off your adventuring pack, gather your spellbooks, swords and laser-based weapons, and off we go...



Christopher John Eggett Editor

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QUICKSTART

> "Baldur's Gate we wanted to paint more like Gotham"
>
> **Chris Perkins, *D&D, p6***

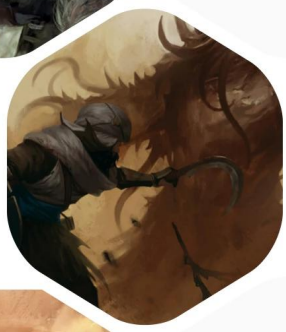
> "Our work lies at the intersection of horror and whimsy"
>
> **Chris Gardiner, *Fallen London, p27***

> "This time you can die"
>
> **Tomas Härenstam, *Things from the Flood, p30***











DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

REVIEWS

070 ALIEN RPG

135 BLACK VOID

071 CALL OF CTHULHU: PETERSEN'S ABOMINATIONS

091 CALL OF CTHULHU: SHADOWS OVER STILLWATER

134 CAPHARNAUM

033 CITY OF MIST

127 CTHULHU DARK AGES

052 CYBERPUNK RED JUMPSTART

018 D&D: ACQUISITIONS INCOPORATED

159 D&D: GHOSTS OF SALTMARSH

013 D&D: MORDENKAINEN'S TOME OF FOES

168 D&D: MYTHIC ODYSSEYS OF THEROS

012 D&D: WAYFINDERS GUIDE TO EBERRON

053 FALLOUT: WASTELAND WARFARE RPG

134 FANTASY AGE COMPANION

063 FATE OF CTHULHU

040 FORBIDDEN LANDS

041 FORBIDDEN LANDS: RAVENS PURGE

163 GENESYS: EXPANDED PLAYERS GUIDE

162 GENESYS: REALMS OF TERRINOTH

090 GENESYS: SHADOWS OF THE BEANSTALK

148 JOHN CARTER OF MARS RPG

153 KIDS ON BIKES

140 LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS RPG

018 LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS RPG: EMERALD EMPIRE

148 LOST CITADEL

103 MASKS OF NYARLATHOTEP

062 MÖRK BORG

057 MY LITTLE PONY: TALES OF EQUESTRIA: THE STORY TELLING GAME

056 MY LITTLE PONY: TALES OF EQUESTRIA: THE OFFICIAL MOVIE SOURCEBOOK

145 NIBIRU

019 ODYSSEY OF THE DRAGONLORDS

141 OVERLIGHT

041 PALEOMYTHIC

053 ROBOTECH: THE MACROSS SAGA

126 ROMANCE OF THE PERILOUS LAND

139 RUNEQUEST: ROLEPLAYING IN GLORANTHA

095 STAR WARS: DAWN OF REBELLION

133 THE ONE RING: OATHS OF THE RIDDERMARK

138 THE WITCHER PEN AND PAPER RPG

032 THINGS FROM THE FLOOD

118 VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE 5TH EDITION

119 VAMPIRE THE MASQUERADE 5TH EDITION – THE FALL OF LONDON

144 WARHAMMER 40,000 ROLEPLAY: WRATH & GLORY

124 WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: FOURTH EDITION

125 WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: ROUGH NIGHTS & HARD DAYS

152 ZWEIHANDER: MAIN GAUCHE

153)ZWEIHANDER: REVISED CORE RULEBOO





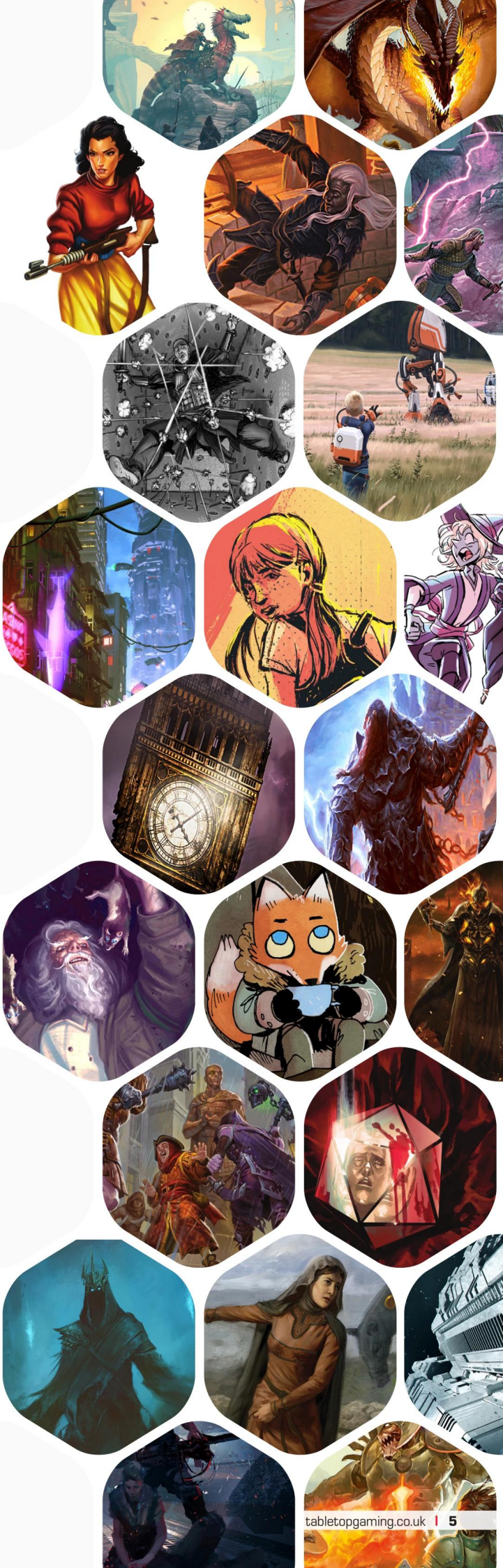
GUIDES

022 USING PUBLISHED ADVENTURES
024 LOSING AS THE GAME MASTER
028 ONE SHOT ADVENTURES
034 PLAYING WITH STRANGERS
046 SETTING BOUNDARIES
054 INTERRUPTED PLANS
080 FIGHTING TALK
096 BUILDING ON A BACKSTORY
110 FORGETTING THE RULES
116 WHEN NOT TO ROLL
128 READING THE ROOM
136 THE MAGIC OF MUSIC
142 BEING A HELPFUL PLAYER
146 THE RECAP
150 REINFORCEMENTS
154 DEATH OF THE WHOLE PARTY
160 PRE-WRITTEN PLANNING
164 THEATRE OF THE MIND
166 KILLING PLAYER'S CHARACTERS

FEATURES

014 ADVENTURE ZONE
064 ALIEN RPG
082 ANDROID NETRUNNER: SHADOW OF THE BEANSTALK
006 D&D DESCENT INTO AVERNUS
104 DEVILS RUN RPG
092 DIE
026 FALLEN LONDON
098 FATE CORE SYSTEM – HOW WE MADE
112 FLASH GORDON
036 FORBIDDEN LANDS
120 GAMES OMNIVOROUS
020 HORROR IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS
058 MÖRK BORG
042 OLD SCHOOL REVIVAL
048 R. TALSORIAN
072 ROOT: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME
156 SUPPLEMENTARILY SPEAKING
130 THE ONE RING
030 THINGS FROM THE FLOOD





TO HELL WITH IT



What does a chicken from the depths of Hell taste like? Venture into the first layer of *Dungeons & Dragons*' Nine Hells and you might come across the common fowl's abyssal cousin, which in *Descent into Avernus* can become familiars or food. Principal story designer Chris Perkins accepts that some players will immediately spark up a fireball barbecue, just to see how the demonic equivalent of a cheeky Nando's goes down.

"We actually have talked about that in the adventure, because it's going to come up!" he laughs.

Roasting chickens is one of the lesser evils going on in *Avernus*, which properly returns *D&D* to the Nine Hells for the first time since the fantasy RPG's second edition almost two decades ago.

"We haven't really done an outer-planer adventure for *Fifth Edition* yet, and we haven't done a Hell adventure in a hell of a long time, since the Planescape days," Perkins says. "So for us it was an opportunity to finally kind of pay off a promise that eventually we would go to the outer planes and visit them to some extent."

Avernus also sees *D&D* head back to one of its most iconic cities, Baldur's Gate, the backdrop for the seminal nineties computer games of the same name. It was the green light for *Baldur's Gate III*, the first numbered entry in the series since 2000, that inspired the tabletop RPG's team to return to the setting for the first time since *Murder in Baldur's Gate*, a 2013 bridge adventure released between *Fourth* and *Fifth Edition*.

"Larian [Studios], who are doing *Baldur's Gate III*, are huge *D&D* goobs," Perkins says. "When they got on board to do a *D&D* story, we felt it was our imperative to tie our big story into Baldur's Gate as well."

Close to three years in the making, Perkins calls *Descent to Avernus* something different to previous *Fifth Edition* adventures, diving into the depths of Nine Hells lore – something rarely explored to this level in *D&D* canon.

"We had what I would consider to be the ideal amount of time to let the story percolate and then do some concept artwork ahead of time to kind of nail down some of the themes and the feel of the story, things like that," Perkins says.



From the bloodstained streets of Baldur's Gate to Hell itself, Dungeons & Dragons' next adventure is its most infernal yet. Chris Perkins drags us into Avernus

Words by **Matt Jarvis** | Main image by **Daarken**, all images courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

SIN CITY

Last year's adventures *Dragon Heist* and *Dungeon of the Mad Mage* took place in (and in the case of *Mad Mage*, under) Waterdeep, the Sword Coast's City of Splendours. *Dragon Heist* particularly ventured into some of the seedier parts of the city, exploring its criminal underbelly and the vigilant City Watch keeping order. But even Waterdeep's most foreboding alleys pale in comparison to the lawless danger of Baldur's Gate.

"Whereas in Waterdeep the city is likely to come down on you pretty hard for crimes, in Baldur's Gate the characters can basically run around and kill people and do what they want – as long as they don't get caught, they'll be fine," Perkins says. "There's this sense of even adventurers in the city can be dangerous; the city itself is a like a dungeon in many respects."

Releasing back-to-back adventures themed around cities is unusual for *Dungeons & Dragons*, but Perkins says that the stark contrast between Waterdeep's vast, welcoming metropolis and the intimidating streets of Baldur's Gate made the team keen to make it their next destination.

"With all the cities on the Sword Coast North, we wanted to kind of make sure they were all distinct in character from each other so that Baldur's Gate felt very different from Waterdeep which felt very different from Neverwinter," he says. "Baldur's Gate we wanted to paint more like Gotham, where you don't want to go through the streets without an escort because you'll likely get murdered and robbed.

> "Baldur's Gate we wanted to paint more like Gotham. Even adventurers in the city can be dangerous."

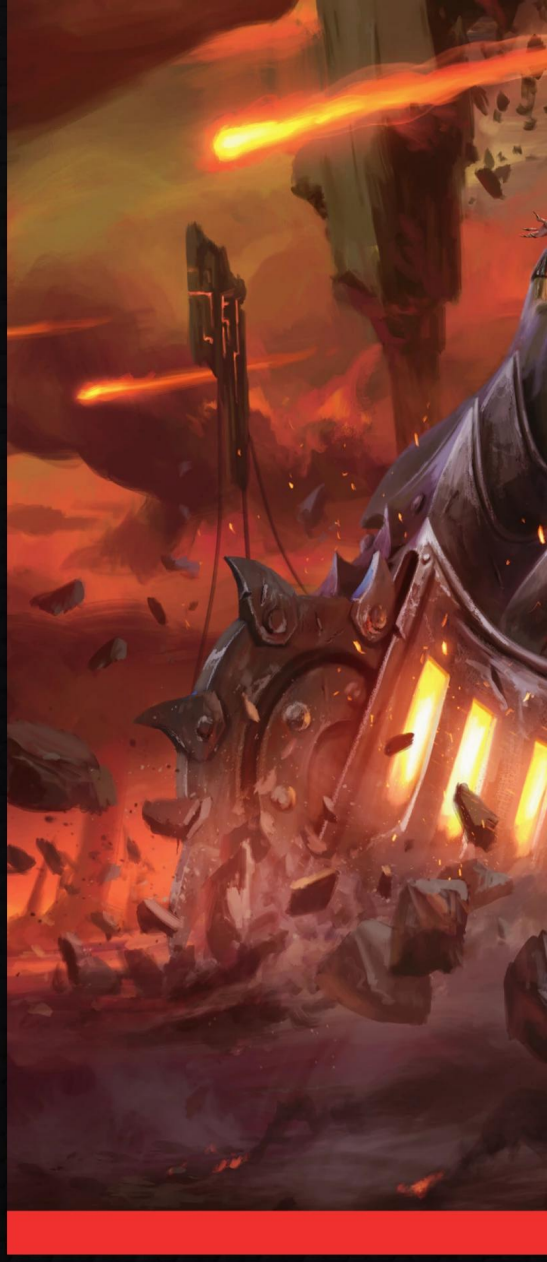
"How do we make the city's identity as the sort of blood-in-the-streets, murder-and-mayhem haven for criminals and pirates come to life? That was the thing that sort of made us think Baldur's Gate could work and be exciting and be a fun place to run around and play with and explore."

Much of the social tension in Baldur's Gate comes from the class warfare between the rich, walled-in inhabitants that occupy the higher parts of the city and the lower areas that Perkins simply calls "a mess".

"Those divisions we just tried to highlight in the story, and so we have characters in the story who really kind of show off the worst traits in all parts of the city," he explains. "They're morally bankrupt; the city is basically run by a corrupt militia – sell-swords paid for by the city to defend them but really just exercising their brutish instincts at whim.

"With Baldur's Gate the real trick was just bringing out the evil in the city and making all the characters that you dealt with or encountered have a dark side to them – or a dark secret or an ulterior

D&D: DESCENT INTO AVERNUS



motive. Their moral compass is shattered, that kind of thing."

Players' characters might not suffer the same comeuppance for wanton acts of violence and other crimes as they did in Waterdeep, but *Avernus*' designers hope that players also consider the morally dubious surroundings as a way of doing bad to do good.

"The trick is to make them feel uncomfortable about it, while at the same time giving them hope that they can actually make change; that they can make the city for the better," Perkins says. "There are people in the city who do need help and they can help them, but then when they run into some assassins in the street they don't have to worry about: is the City Watch is going to arrest them for drawing their swords out and just murdering these people? The answer is no; nobody cares. As long as you discard the corpses, clean up after yourself, you're fine."

Baldur's Gate is home to plenty of earthly sins, but the city's darkness runs deeper than its cobbled streets. Infernal forces from the Nine Hells have infiltrated the city, bringing even more of a hellish feel to its underlying evil. Imps emerge from the underworld to spy on people, make deals and corrupt citizens, taking advantage of a populace already up to their elbows in the dirty struggle to survive.

Soon enough, the players discover the entire city is one of several at risk of being dragged down into Hell itself – and that, whether the city is rescued or not, an even greater evil lies behind it that could threaten every realm.

"As they are sort of pulled through various encounters in Baldur's Gate, they discover that there is an infernal machination behind all of this and possibly something in the city that may be the root cause, that may actually lead to the city's doom," Perkins says. "Finding it, digging around for it, meeting horrible people and trying to get the information out of them about where this thing might be is sort of part and parcel of what the adventure's all about."

Eventually, though, there's only one option: to descend into Hell itself. (Well, almost one option; "We don't necessarily assume that all parties are going to want to do that," Perkins laughs. "You may have a group of players who go, 'No, I think we've done enough. We're not going there!'") With the first layer of the Nine Hells the party's ultimate destination on their quest to save the city, suddenly Baldur's Gate doesn't look quite so uninviting.

"Baldur's Gate is where the adventure starts, but the adventure ends in Hell," Perkins says gleefully. "What we wanted to do is give you a little taste or this sense of as bad as things can be in Baldur's Gate, as wretched a city as it can be, it's nothing compared to what you're about to sink into."

He laughs. "And so by the end of the adventure the characters probably say, 'You know, that Baldur's Gate? Not such a bad town!'"

HELL IS WAR

Descent to Avernus isn't just the first time many *Dungeons & Dragons* players will visit the setting's underworld – the game's designers are also treading new, ash-strewn ground.

"There hasn't been a lot traditionally written about the Nine Hells," says Perkins. "There haven't been a lot of adventures in the Nine Hells or anything like that."

What drew Perkins, lead designer Adam Lee and the rest of the team to the first layer of the Nine Hells specifically was the chance to tell the story of the ruler of Avernus, Zariel. A celestial angel turned archdevil forced to make a deal with the supreme master of the Nine Hells, Asmodeus, following her failed attempt to bring an end to the millennia-long Blood War between demons and devils, Zariel's chance for salvation is a central thread in *Descent to Avernus*.

"The designers really kind of warmed over to this idea of: can you find redemption in Hell? Is this creature salvageable? Is there hope for salvation after all of this?" Perkins says. "With all of our stories, I think we're looking for some sort of humanistic root; something that when you read the story you may not know that the story is about that, but on some human level you sort of understand that there's more going on in the story. That was the human element that we wanted to tackle with this story: the idea of redemption. Also the idea of corruption and how one small deal can lead to another and another and another until suddenly you realise you have lost everything that you were. And is there any road back from that?"

Like Zariel, the Blood War that serves as the background to *Descent to Avernus* was first introduced in the Planescape setting for second-edition *D&D* and has a key role in the lore of the Nine Hells.

"The Blood War is this cosmic struggle between two different facets of evil: the demons, who represent chaos, and the devils, who represent order and tyranny," Perkins summarises. "This bloodbath has waged across the multiverse, mostly on the outer planes, for eternity and will continue to do so. Evil will always consume itself in this way."

> "With all of our stories, I think we're looking for some sort of humanistic root."

Although the Blood War is a central part of the Nine Hells, getting involved in an endless struggle between the almighty powers of evil is probably a bit too much to ask of players' roving band of adventurers – especially when both forces involved are the bad side.

"Because it's evil on evil, it tends to be more of a backdrop than anything else," Perkins says. "There are forces who will meddle in the Blood War and try to push it one way or the other, but really it's about the lower planes feeding on itself. But it does spill over into the material plane occasionally, of course, with calamitous results.

"As the Blood War has been raging a long time, the trick story-wise is how to sort of involve the characters in it without it being overwhelming. Because on the one hand, why insert yourself into a conflict where evil is just basically destroying itself? Why not just let it happen?"

Perkins describes players' experience of the Blood War as being behind the



Players can race and fight infernal war machines inspired by the car carnage of *Mad Max: Fury Road* (*Daarken*)

frontline, encountering the repercussions of the conflict without being directly involved – and even benefitting from its all-encompassing scrap between Hell's nastiest beings.

"Avernus is one of the major battlegrounds for the Blood War, so if the adventure takes you to there and you have to accomplish something there, you really can't get away from that at that point," Perkins says. "That's part of what the story of *Descent into Avernus* tries to get at: this is going on, you are now aware that it's going on and the wise person will stay as far away from it as possible, but can you accomplish your goal in Avernus and get out alive – not be completely consumed by demons and devils at war with each other?

"Because Avernus is such a dangerous place and the characters are not 20th-level when they go down there, the Blood War actually provides a welcome distraction. It's keeping the devils of Avernus distracted so that a party of adventurers can actually move through the plane successfully and accomplish certain goals. So we're using it in the story almost to the characters' advantage. Which is weird and fun. This idea that this horrible cosmic conflict is what the characters basically need to survive."

DEALING WITH THE DEVIL

Zariel, the Blood War and many of *Descent into Avernus*' monsters were detailed in last year's *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* – Perkins teases that the archwizard himself even puts in an appearance in this latest adventure. They're joined by a host of new and returning characters, including demon lords last seen in 2015 Underdark adventure *Out of the Abyss* and Kostchtchie, the frost giant deity making his debut in *Fifth Edition*.

"We like to pull forward a lot of these old characters who maybe haven't gotten a lot of attention," Perkins enthuses.

Not all of Hell's residents are demons and devils. The players will encounter prominent characters such as Thavius Kreeg, a mortal whose fate in Avernus serves as an example of the dangers of dealing with devils.

"A lot of the characters that you meet in Avernus are characters who have made deals that have gone bad or thought they could make a difference in the Nine Hells and realise they got in way over their heads," Perkins says. "And then there's just fun characters which we inserted into the story so that you could socialise with creatures that weren't simply demons and devils."

The players themselves can find themselves reluctantly cutting a deal with one of Avernus' devilish denizens in order to further their own quest. Certain situations will see 'devil deals' proposed by characters including Arkhan the Cruel, a dragonborn paladin that first appeared as actor Joe Manganiello's guest character in *D&D* web series *Critical Role* and makes a cameo in *Avernus* as part of his side plot to free evil dragon queen Tiamat, who is trapped on the first layer of Hell.

"He wants something for his time and his help – and that 'something' is pretty bad," Perkins laughs.

"There's a little game you can play with him and Tiamat to try to get her help. But the price might be you might accidentally help free Tiamat – and that would of course be bad in other ways."

Devil deals can emerge outside of the story, too, with DMs able to use the rules to invoke the demonic power of Avernus' creatures and tempt players into signing contracts with their soul on the line.

"There's a section in the adventure which we call bargain basement death saves, where if you're bleeding out, you're dying, an archfiend might contact you telepathically and say, 'Hey, I will make sure that you stay alive if you do X for me,'" Perkins says. "If the player decides that they wanna

D&D: DESCENT INTO AVERNUS



Friends and foes, new and old, show up in Avernus (*Chris Rallis*)

make this deal, they automatically roll a 20 on their next death save. So that means that they can just get back up and they have one hit point, but they're still in the game. But now they're sort of bound by this deal that they made in desperation. Mechanisms like that were introduced in the adventure so the DM could really emphasise just how precarious these deals can be."

Why put your own soul at risk, though? A different – arguably preferable – way of bartering with infernal beings is with the souls of others, trapped in Avernus' freshly-minted (for the RPG, at least) currency of soul coins.

"Soul coins are something new," Perkins says. "That came out of a brainstorm session with the writers. They were talking about all the different ways to sort of emphasise the themes of the story and one of those ideas was currency. What is the currency of the Nine Hells? Well, the currency of the Nine Hells is souls. There are a number of ways that devils can get their hands on souls, but they also came up with this idea of maybe some souls are sort of taken into Mammon's forge on the third layer of Hell and actually bound within these coins that can then serve as a portable currency that devils could trade and other creatures could trade with devils. Sort of like a soul in your pocket; it's just an easy way to carry a soul."

Soul coins can be used for more than hellish vending machines and stocking up at the closest merchant. The life energy within can be consumed by characters to recover after a particularly exhausting battle, with three charges per coin to use. The coins also power infernal war machines, Avernus' favoured transportation method – simply pop a soul into the vehicle's furnace and you'll have 72 hours of fuel to cross the hellscape. (Perkins laughs when asked if different souls get different mileage – it turns out everyone's essence is equally economical in Hell.)

> "We're always kind of reaching into the past to try to pull forward things that are still resonant."

"You can feed the soul coins into an infernal war machine almost like coins in a slot machine and they power these roaring engines of destruction that you can use to travel," Perkins says. "That was interesting because then it brought all these conversations; well, would characters use soul coins to expedite their voyages across the face of Avernus if given the chance? What's the morality of that? So soul coins became this fuel that characters could use in their quest to survive and prevail in the Nine Hells."

DRIVE LIKE HELL

Seabound adventure *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* took players onto the high seas earlier this year, introducing vehicular rules for ships. Large and slow, the vessels more acted as locations for encounters to play out, with ship-on-ship combat only occurring when two of the floating fortresses drifted close together.

Descent into Avernus' landbound infernal war machines couldn't be more different. Furiously fast as they race across the Nine Hells, Perkins describes the soul-powered contraptions as akin to dune buggies, tanks and motorcycles. One thing they do have in common with *Saltmarsh*'s ships is their place in the world as more than toys.

"The appearance of vehicles in *Saltmarsh* was driven by the story need; the appearance of vehicles in *Avernus* also was driven by story," he insists. "We wouldn't have really done anything with vehicles if we didn't feel like the story deserved it."

Perkins describes the rules for infernal war machines as similarly being led by their narrative role, avoiding the risk of creating a convoluted set of rules that bring the fast-paced car carnage skidding to a halt.

"We don't want to create a game within a game if we can get away with it," he assures. "We don't want to suddenly turn this into some sort of separate mini-style game where you need a bunch of components and a board and other things to play. *D&D* is still very much a 'theatre of the mind' experience.

"When you imagine a *Mad Max: Fury Road*-style chase or encounter between war machines, you imagine it all happening very fast. And so we tried to create a system where you can run the vehicles and keep things fast and fluid and not bog down. We wanted to keep it feeling brisk."

Just as important as the war machines are their drivers. Characters can take up different roles in a machine's crew, using weapons, cranes, wrecking balls and more as part of their turn during combat.

"Certain war machines have certain types of weapons or defences on them, but they're all activated by the characters," Perkins explains. "The war machines really do nothing unless the characters make them do it. There's a pilot station where the war machine can be driven, but we basically tell DMs: 'Hey, this war machine handles like a motorcycle.' Everybody knows how a motorcycle runs and behaves and things like that, we don't have to tell you."

The machines aren't exactly racing over smooth tarmac, and the hellmobiles are hardly subject to a regular MOT. The chase rules in *Fifth Edition*'s *Dungeon Master's Guide* get an update with a set of rules specific to Avernus, bringing in the chaotic elements of the Nine Hells that players wouldn't encounter anywhere else. If driving wasn't dangerous enough, the DM has a table they can roll on to throw a further spanner in the works.

"There are mishaps that can happen in an infernal war machine just by virtue of how they're built and whatnot, which kind of gives the DM that sort of randomness element, that surprise," Perkins says. "The battle's not going to play out the way you think it is because there are some random elements interjected. Something could go wrong on the vehicle; suddenly it could be engulfed in flames or the furnace might crack and something bad might happen, and somebody might have to do some impromptu repair work in order to negate the effects of that."

Perkins says, just as in *Saltmarsh* and *Avernus*, the designers consider vehicles set pieces that they and DMs can use to bring future adventures to life.

"It'll be on a story-by-story basis," he says. "Beyond that I can't really say. We might do a future setting which is, I don't know, Antarctica or something and so suddenly dog-sledding is going to be important. We'll let the story dictate those needs."

DEPTHS OF THE PAST

Descent into Avernus expands parts of *Dungeons & Dragons* lore that have been rarely explored over the RPG's 40-plus year history. At the same time, it draws from the game's vast universe, giving its creators the chance to bring characters, locations and stories that might have drifted out of consciousness over the decades to a new generation of players.

"It's a fun exercise when you've got 40-plus years of lore and stories behind you," Perkins says. "*D&D* is now a multi-generational game. I think there's to some extent an obligation – I don't mean that as a negative – to look back and see what's there that we can pull forward, just to keep these cool things in the consciousness of the *D&D* community.

"We're always kind of reaching into the past to try to pull forward things that we think are still resonant, or that we can contemporise and sort of put a spin on so that you can kind of see it in a new and refreshing way. A lot of the stories we've told with *Fifth Edition* have certainly endeavoured to do that. For me, it's always a pleasurable exercise to look back and see what can be pulled forward. Often, it doesn't start with, 'Hey, let's go to the past and see what we can make a story out of.' Usually, it's, 'Hey, we have a story. Now let's go into the past to see what we can bring back to fit into that story.'"

Perkins gives the example of the cult character Warduke, who first entered *D&D* lore as an action figure in the early 1980s. The character appeared in 1984 adventure *Quest for the Heartstone* and a series of merchandise, before largely fading into *D&D* history – after a brief return in a 2003 issue of *Dungeon* magazine, Warduke's last appearance was as a figurine for the *D&D Miniatures* game in 2006.

"There was one piece of art of him that kind of stuck in my mind. I've never been able to shake it," Perkins says. "And so we're actually talking about bringing this character who was an action figure back into a future story. Nobody's out there saying that they want it, but the story is really cool and this character just fits so nicely into it, that when people see it they're going to go: 'Who is this guy?' 'Where did he come from?' And then they're going to look back in the lore and go, 'Oh my god, there's like an action figure of this guy!' And it'll slowly peel itself away and you'll realise, 'Oh, this was here all along and we didn't know it.

"That's the kind of thing I'm kind of looking for in future stories: this real sense of discovery. There are things out there in *D&D*'s past you have no idea that they exist. And they're cool and they're neat and they inspire. I feel it's incumbent upon us to help find those things."

Whether it's the taste of abyssal chicken or the return of an obscure action figure, Perkins says that it's *D&D*'s everlasting search for the next discovery that will continue to guide its designers – and the players who embark on their adventures, to Hell and back.

"I always want to do things that have kind of a surprise to them. Like, 'Oh my god, I can't believe they went back and found that!'"



Many of Avernus' monsters and characters appeared in *Mordenkainen's Tome of Foes* (*Aleksi Briclot*)

SEE THE STUNNING D&D ARTWORK IN FULL PANORAMIC VIEWS IN THE DIGITAL EDITION
pocketmags.com/tabletop-gaming-magazine



D&D: WAYFINDER'S GUIDE TO EBERRON

A new world to explore

Designer: Keith Baker, Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

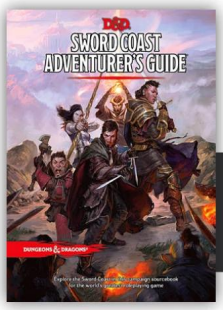
176 | 13+ | £15

This snappy little guidebook lays out the groundwork for running a *Dungeons & Dragons: Fifth Edition* game in Eberron's weird and wonderful world of lightning-powered trains and raptor-riding halflings and, though it falls well short of a complete setting book, there's plenty to here to work with.

Released with very little warning through the official *D&D* Dungeon Masters' Guild webstore, *Wayfinder's Guide to Eberron* is a slim PDF-only volume that offers a crash course in the history and rules needed to run a campaign or two. This covers a trio of new race options that include the fan-favourite warforged, a species of artificially-created robots, as well as a vast array of ways to create characters that use 'dragonmarks' – mystical brands that allow the bearer to channel powerful abilities.

All this comes with a promise of more updates to come as the contents of the book are playtested and refined over the coming months and possible years. However, this promise – and the unexpected nature of the release – does leave all the rules and character options hovering in a strange, quasi-official limbo state. For example, while it has been confirmed by the *D&D* design team that the book itself is considered official, the races and other options within it are still 'playtest material' and therefore subject to change and banned in organised play events.





Still, if you don't particularly mind potentially having to update a character sheet to match new decisions down the line, *Wayfinder's Guide to Eberron* is an incredible gateway into one of the most fascinating worlds in the *D&D* line-up.

Originally created by *Gloom* designer Keith Baker for a competition some 16 years ago, Eberron is a wonderful example of how to take the standard fantasy setting and twist it into something fresh. While many of the standard fantasy tropes are still accounted for – there are still dragons to battle and dungeons to delve – there is a deliberate effort to shift away from Tolkien rip-offs and instead start ripping off everything from *Jurassic Park* to *Casablanca*.

If that sounds like a criticism, it really isn't. RPGs are all about creating shared worlds and stories, and one of the best ways to draw out those ideas is by working in threads that people can instantly jump onto. By picking, choosing and spinning out a mishmash of concepts from pop culture, Baker has created something undeniably fun.

These ideas include fleets of elementally-fuelled airships plying the skyways, magical laundries servicing noble houses, lycanthropic adventurers and – of course – wild halfling tribes that hunt from the backs of their raptors.

The entire setting is packed with magical gadgets and gizmos, but at the same time it manages to feel a little more down-to-earth and dirtier than the Forgotten Realms, which has hosted virtually all of the *D&D: Fifth Edition* products published before this book. Where more traditional worlds have played host to battles between good and evil on a vast scale, Eberron is gripped in a cold war where there is very little black-and-white morality to spare, which may appeal to groups that keep their eye on profits while saving villagers from this week's threat.

While it does a great job of setting up this huge world, DMs planning to launch a campaign deeply rooted in a particular area or culture may be a little frustrated at the overall lack of detail in *Wayfinder's Guide to Eberron*. The section of faiths and religions – fairly important in a game where clerics and paladins play major roles – stretches to maybe four pages, and entire regions of the continent where most of the main events are set are lucky to get a few paragraphs dedicated to them, creating the feeling that you're reading an introduction to something larger that's still waiting in the wings.

In some ways that's not a problem, because it's made abundantly clear that this isn't intended as a complete, standalone world guide, and if you're really dedicated to uncovering the lore then the background information in books for the earlier editions is still relevant if you can track down a copy. However, the whistle-stop tour of the world and changeable nature of some of the rules does sometimes leave you feeling like you shelled out £15 for playtest material.

Still, if you're in any way curious about Eberron and feel like messing about in its magical playgrounds, it's easy to see that expense as an investment in something fascinating. Even if you're determined to stick with the Forgotten Realms or your own homebrewed world the sheer range of stuff going on within *Wayfarer's Guide to Eberron* can be an incredible way to fire up the imagination.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A nifty introduction to a very different kind of *D&D* setting.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
SWORD COAST ADVENTURER'S GUIDE

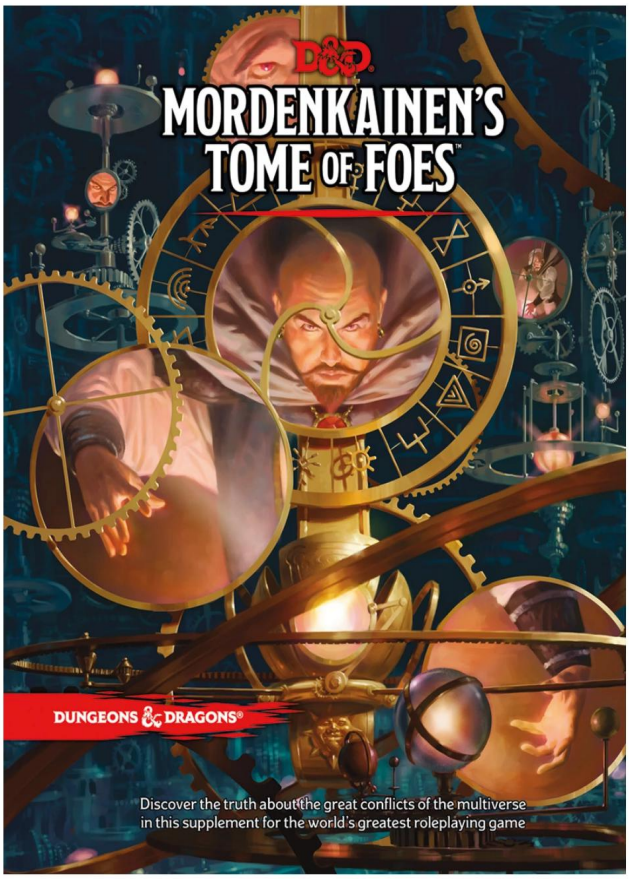
The Forgotten Realms' Sword Coast is the traditional home of *D&D: Fifth Edition*, but *Wayfarer's Guide* offers fresh insights into a new realm

D&D: MORDENKAINEN'S TOME OF FOES

Devils and demons for your Dungeons & Dragons

Designer: Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

252 | 13+ | £30



It can be quite hard to describe what the latest addition to *D&D: Fifth Edition*'s line-up actually is. There are plenty of new monsters to use and vast swathes of lore and setting detail, but isn't quite a new bestiary, nor is it a sourcebook. The only way to really sum it up is that it brings more to the table: more creatures, more background, more player options, more everything.

In that way, you could perhaps view it as a companion piece to last year's *Xanathar's Guide to Everything* but, where that book was primarily aimed at players, *Tome of Foes* is mostly here for the person sitting behind the DM screen. It helps them to expand their game, both with new rules and mechanics, and storytelling hooks and wild ideas that can spark the imagination and propel a campaign from scuffles with local threats into a journey across the planes.

The section that will probably get the most use, however, is the one containing new monster statistics. This accounts for around half of the book's page count on its own and is packed with all manner of nasty creatures that can spice up adventures and ruin heroes' days in equal measure.

While a long list of modifiers and attacks may seem a little dry, the sheer imagination on display is infectious, and most DMs out there won't be able to keep a smile from creeping across their face as plans for using these horrible new tools spring into their mind. Some of the standout creatures on display could easily form the heart of an adventure all on their own, with the memory-stealing oozes known as 'oblex' an instant classic in the making.

Beyond that, *Tome of Foes* has clearly been designed with high-level play in mind, and the monsters on display average out as being around twice as challenging as those found in the original *Monster Manual*. This includes everything from Lovecraftian star spawn to powerful elder elementals, as well as an entire pantheon of evil archdevils and demon lords that could easily take on an entire party of well-armed adventurers single-handed.

This feeds in to a major theme of the setting information that accounts for the first few chapters, detailing the differences between the superficially similar demons and devils as well as their endless battles over which strain of fiendish evil is best suited for universal domination.

While these make for an enjoyable read that helps to set up the wider world and provide ideas that could potentially be woven into stories and campaigns, ultimately it seems a little lacking in hooks for getting players directly involved in the conflict. This limits its actual use out of very specific campaigns and adventures and feels as though it's being planted to set up another product further down the line.

Something much more likely to actually crop up at most tables are the chapters spelling out a little more information on the major non-human player races included in the game, such as elves, dwarves, halflings and gnomes. These are great reads that go into detail on each race's culture and religion, with a focus on why some of them leave the safety of home and wander off to become heroes, making them useful for both players and DMs alike.

All these are peppered with a handful of new options for players, most of which are focused on alternate takes on existing races, such as the Shader-kai – gloomy cousins to elves – and the sinister ashen-skinned dwarves known as Duergar.

If it sounds as though there's a lot packed into the pages of *Tome of Foes*, that's because there is. It feels as though the designers have made a deliberate step away from pitching one book at players and another at DMs, and rather just mixed it all together so that every new purchase gives a little something to the gaming group as a whole.

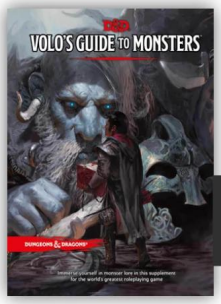
The biggest downside to the book as a whole is that the first half is less useful for groups who play in extensively homebrewed worlds, but even then there's plenty of information that can be modified or twisted to fit. Beyond that, the initial run of books has been hit by a few production issues including typos and occasional errors, while a large number of books arrived with scratched or damaged covers – something that is hard enough to ignore from small RPG publishers, let alone the biggest name in the industry.

Ultimately though, this really is an instant pick-up for long-term *D&D* fans, especially those who are interested in taking games to a higher power level. Just try to resist the temptation to try out that new astral dreadnaught on your third-level party, okay?

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

New monsters, new lore and a few new player options make this a great addition to the *Fifth Edition* line-up.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... VOLO'S GUIDE TO MONSTERS

Where Volo provided guides to some of the more terrestrial creatures in the *D&D* multiverse, Mordenkainen takes things to a new place – often quite literally.

IN THE ZONE

Three brothers and their dad turned their Dungeons & Dragons campaign into a hilarious, heartfelt sensation. With a hit podcast and bestselling graphic novel under their belt, the McElroys and artist Carey Pietsch take us deeper into The Adventure Zone

Words by **Nathanael Smith**



"I'm so afraid that if we stopped to think about it, it'd be like Wile E. Coyote looking down after walking off a cliff and being like 'Oh nooooo' and [we'd] wake up from the coma in which it was all a dream."

Travis McElroy is describing the experience of seeing *The Adventure Zone* become an international sensation. What started out as a joke podcast to fill time during paternity leave has become a multimedia marvel, with the kind of devoted fans who pack out theatres in highly detailed cosplay and send graphic novels to the top of *The New York Times*' bestseller list.

Some context for the uninitiated: *The Adventure Zone* is a massively popular actual-play *Dungeons & Dragons* podcast, created by three brothers, Justin, Travis and Griffin McElroy, along with their father, Clint. They recorded the first episode as filler for *My Brother, My Brother and Me*, their flagship 'advice' podcast wherein the advice should never be followed. It was a sprawling, messy 90 minutes of *D&D* where two of the players clearly didn't know what they were doing. But there was a spark of silliness and creativity there; fans demanded more. Swiftly, it became its own podcast, emerging from its humble origins to grow into a wild, exhilarating, wonderful, ridiculous 69-episode tale (subtitled *Balance*) in worlds and storylines concocted by dungeon master Griffin.

Last year, the McElroys released the first graphic novel adaptation of *The Adventure Zone*, teaming up with illustrator Carey Pietsch to bring the podcast to life on the page. The book, *Here There Be Gerblins*, broke records and received a glowing foreword from *The Name of the Wind* fantasy author – and noted roleplaying fan – Patrick Rothfuss.

Ahead of the release of the second *Adventure Zone* graphic novel, *Murder on the Rockport Limited!*, this month, Pietsch and the three McElroy brothers spoke to us about *D&D*, turning the game into a podcast and graphic novel – and how something so goofy became so great.

ROOM TO IMPROV

At first glance, *D&D* might not seem like an ideal medium for audio storytelling; there's a whole lot of lore tied in with the game and a dense, unwieldy ruleset. *The Adventure Zone* neatly circumnavigates those issues by, well, cheating.

"I'd just trample the rules whenever I needed to, much to the chagrin of a lot of our listeners." Griffin is unashamed. "I was a very lenient DM in that regard. I was trying to tell a story – that was always the most important thing."

The McElroys never worried too much about distance or the time it took to cast a spell; there's even a running joke in the show about how Clint, playing as the dwarf cleric Merle, never knows how to play the game.

Dungeons & Dragons is still an integral part of the show, its *raison d'etre*. The family plays *Fifth Edition*, which is "structured just enough so that you can see where you want to break it" according to Travis, who plays as brawny human fighter/'ruff boi' Magnus. *Here There Be Gerblins* is even based on a campaign from *D&D*'s starter set, although the rest of the scenarios in the *Balance* campaign were created by Griffin.

As anyone who has played *D&D* or another RPG will tell you, it's an experience that requires constant invention and innovation. In comedy terms, it's basically improv. Justin – also known as fabulous high-elf wizard Taako – sums up the appeal.

"Any time you're doing improv, prompts are really important," he says. "In a sense, the randomness and the constant dice rolls are just prompts for ways to take your narrative. As a creator it's a really invigorating way to work; you have to be purely reactive."

"The idea of us trying to tell a story but randomly succeeding or randomly failing at the things we're trying to do adds a really fascinating aspect to everything," adds Griffin.

This element of unpredictability led to some of the wildest moments in the *Balance* campaign: an overenthusiastic roll ending in light murder during an engine heist, a beloved bugbear becoming a recurring character due to one particularly powerful persuasion charm.

CHAOS AND CREATION

As the narrative progressed in the *Adventure Zone*, things got serious. We're talking monsters consuming entire planes, liches feeding off people's misery and familial bonds transcending death. Yet it remained a podcast started by three brothers with a penchant for poop jokes so, even in its darkest moments, there remained a sense of gleeful, puerile anarchy.

"What's funny is that the goofy stuff, most of which was improvised in the moment of not taking the game very seriously, actually provided the bedrock foundation for the more serious, dramatic story stuff that comes later," Griffin explains. "In the moment, of course we didn't think it was going to become what it is, but I think back on the talking elevator or the scene where Merle seduces a plant – I look back on that really fondly because I



Interiors: © The Adventure Zone: Murder on the Rockport Limited! by Clint McElroy, Griffin McElroy, Justin McElroy, Travis McElroy, and Carey Pietsch, illustrated by Carey Pietsch: First Second, 2019

feel like the stuff that came after it wouldn't have happened if it wasn't for the goof-off stuff."

"It was anarchic in the beginning," Justin agrees. "A lot of that was choices that were defining the characters. A good example is [recurring bit] 'Taako's good out here,' which was Taako's hesitance to rush into a fight. It was a choice that I made while we were recording because it seemed creatively interesting in the moment. Then as we progressed the story, that became part of who he was. One of the nice things about doing the graphic novel is that we have these characters that we can add that consistency to. Those anarchic choices have helped to define who those characters were and we were able to bring that to the book now."

It's not only mayhem in the mixture; there's a genuine optimism to the storytelling, too. As the show matured, it discovered emotional resonance in its ragtag found family. The central trio of characters attracted around them an array of delightful NPCs, from boy detectives to depressed musicians. The finale of *Balance* incorporated four characters that provided a rock-solid emotional core to the themes of family and sacrifice.

It was this lightness of tone mixed with ambitious storytelling that drew in legions of listeners. Carey Pietsch was among them. She was a fan from the early days – even having the dragonborn rogue Carey Fangbattle introduced in *Balance*'s fourth story, *The Crystal Kingdom*, named after her – and was involved in compiling *The Adventure Zine*, a fan-art collection for charity. Like many others, Pietsch says she was drawn to the positivity of the podcast.

"[It's a] kind-hearted and fun approach to a fantasy setting, that was what hooked me. The McElroys have talked a lot about keeping joy in mind as a touchstone and that really comes through in the way that they engage with each other and with the world."

With Pietsch on board, all the team had to do was create an entirely visual graphic novel from an entirely audio medium.

KEEP IT LIGHT

Adapting a sprawling *D&D* campaign with dozens of episodes and a devoted fanbase was not going to be an easy task**.** One of the first, crucial decisions was to maintain the upbeat tone that made the podcast so popular. *Dungeons & Dragons* may bring to mind a certain aesthetic; *The Adventure Zone* aims for something different.

"I have a deep fondness for the kitschiness of old *D&D* artwork," Pietsch explains, "but it was a deliberate choice to lean into a lot more expressive and cartoony styles for these books. *The Adventure Zone* is really tonally different from a lot of traditional, Western medieval high fantasy, so I did really want to keep that joyful and fun tone coming through in the artwork."

One glance at the artwork from *Rockport* and it's clear that Pietsch has succeeded. It's got a fun, fresh aesthetic that captures the character of the podcast with a simple raised eyebrow here or cocky stance there.

"One of the ways that I thought I would best be able to [keep the tone] was to work in a format that let us have a lot more leeway in terms of what a character can physically act like and how goofy you can push their expressions on the page," Pietsch says. "That's much easier to do with a cartoony figure than with a realistic one."

Perhaps the boldest decision was to keep *The Adventure Zone* a roleplaying tale through-and-through by incorporating the role of the DM into the comic. We get Griffin himself, obliterating the fourth wall by conversing with the characters and wryly commenting on their decisions. There are references to inspiration points, spell slots and levelling-up.

"The first question we had to answer was how much of the meta-narrative, of us making the story out of an RPG, did we want to include," Griffin says. "The answer ended up being that *we* would not be in the book – it wouldn't cut back to us playing *Dungeons & Dragons* eating Doritos, because that would break the flow, and we have so much story in each book that we need to tell, it would just be wasted ink. But we wanted there to be the option to use that meta-narrative to bridge these huge chasms of stuff that happens in the story.

"Me being a godlike figure was a solution to a lot of different narrative problems we had."

KILLING JOKES

Murder on the Rockport Limited! promises even more daft delights and gorgeous fantasy storytelling



BELOW
The McElroys: Clint, Justin, Travis and Griffin (*Portraits to the People*)



on the heels of *Gerblins*. The original run of podcast episodes saw the introduction of some fan-favourite characters such as Jenkins, Jess the Beheader and Angus McDonald, boy detective.

"We actually cut all of them." Justin deadpans.

Joking aside, the team can't wait for fans to discover the graphic novel adaptation of *Rockport*.

"In the second book, there's an extended train sequence with Magnus rappelling down the side of the train." Travis excitedly recalls. "In the podcast, it's all description, when we were actually having to draw it, we had to do a lot more 'Yeah, but… how?'"

Fans of the podcast will know exactly the sequence the McElroy brother describing. What they might not know is that the book contains new spins on the original podcast and unexpected events. When the team talk about the end of the book they don't want to give anything away, but they're clearly all very excited.

"There's a new kind of thing at the end of book two that, when I saw it, it blew me away," Griffin enthuses. "It was wild to envision," says Justin, "and it was wild to see on the page."

Carey chips in: "That actually came straight from you guys discussing what comes later in the arc of the podcast, that you wanted to bring forward in *Rockport* a little earlier."

Keeping schtum, Griffin cryptically adds, "I believe it was Ali's [Alison Wilgus, one of the book's editors] idea, who has such a comprehensive knowledge of the whole arc of it, she was able to say, 'It's really weird that this reaction doesn't happen here.'"

Could this be an early hint of The Hunger? The team aren't telling whether the big bad of the *Balance* campaign will make an appearance, but the prospect is enticing.

THE NEXT ADVENTURE

The team aren't letting fame get to their heads. The brothers may have voice cameos in the next *Trolls* film (it's a long story) but they aren't optimistic about a A-list movie adaptation of *The Adventure Zone*. (In Griffin's words: "We will never be placed in the same room as Justin Timberlake.")

If *Rockport* does well, fans will be baying for a graphic novel for *Balance* chapter three, *Petals to the Metal*. In the meantime, the McElroys will continue experimenting with different RPGs for their podcast. They're currently working through the third *Adventure Zone* campaign, *Amnesty*, which sees them leave *D&D* behind for a *Monster of the Week* game. Supporters of the podcast have been treated to bonus episodes using lighthearted one-shot RPGs – the latest standalone campaign saw the group play Grant Howitt's *Honey Heist*, where the McElroys brought their signature comedy to bear robbers trying to steal valuable honey from Jerry Seinfeld.

Travis' fears were misplaced. *The Adventure Zone* creators aren't Wile E. Coyote running off a cliff, they're Road Runner: always defying expectations, always one step ahead of the game and always with an endless supply of entertaining antics to keep us laughing.

PLAY, LISTEN!

Three more roleplaying podcasts to treat your ears to

CRITICAL ROLE

A series for people who like their lore meaty and their storytelling intense, *Critical Role* is one of the most popular *D&D* podcasts out there. A cast of professional voice actors lends it some real dramatic heft and has attracted legions of dedicated fans.

FRIENDS AT THE TABLE

The McElroys themselves are big fans of this world-building-focused series – Griffin even once tweeted that it was his very favourite podcast. A lot of the gameplay is *Dungeon World*, a sleeker (some would say easier) RPG than the more rules-heavy *D&D*.

DRAGON TALK

The podcast that comes with the official seal of approval from *D&D* maker Wizards of the Coast. It's packed with information and discussions about everything from the latest stories to guest appearances from high-profile fans.

DUNGEON MASTERY

The Adventure Zone's resident DM Griffin McElroy gives his advice on running a memorable campaign

"It's all subjective. I think it's different for every table, right? And that's the most important thing: to be adaptive and responsive to a) what kind of game your players like and b) what moves your players are making and where they want to take it. The story has to evolve around it. I really think that's the most important thing. Obviously coming up with a cool idea for your campaign is the most important thing, but you have to be ready to let that stuff go if it doesn't go your way.

"I'd also say, really try and think of like a clever idea for your campaign. Don't necessarily make it traditional fantasy stuff, unless you want that. *D&D*, I am learning, can be applied to so many different kinds of genres and settings, so you can be inspired by *Fast and the Furious* or *Aliens* or whatever. That was the joy of *The Adventure Zone;* each arc could be a completely different thing, still playing the same game. So don't feel hemmed in to what has usually been done in *D&D* or fantasy storytelling."

DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: ACQUISITIONS INCORPORATED

224 | 13+ | £39

Designer: Wizards of the Coast team | **Artist:** Various

Have you ever thought that fantasy adventuring needed more corporate structuring, nebulous morality and seriously silly comedy? If so you're in luck, because while the latest *Dungeons & Dragons* supplement leans a little heavily on references, it gives DMs across the world a chance to embrace the wackier aspects of their roleplaying.

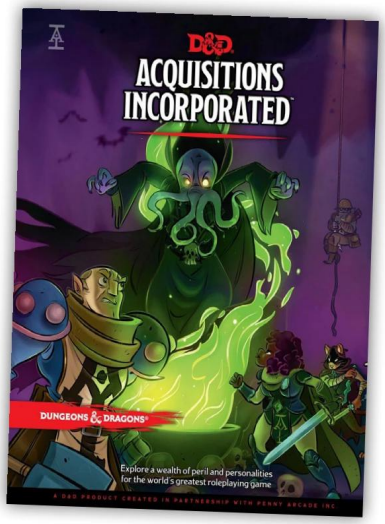
Entirely based on a long-running collaboration between the folks behind the *Penny Arcade* webcomic and *D&D* publisher Wizards of the Coast, the book's mere existence is a tribute to RPGs' moves into the mainstream. What started out as a faintly silly podcast in 2008 has grown to encompass live shows, streamed adventures and celebrity collaborations, all revolving around the titular Acquisitions Incorporated – an ever-expanding corporation devoted to reaping the maximum profits from the adventuring biz.

The book itself is devoted to helping you set up your very own Acq Inc. franchise and is stuffed with new player options to help with that. There are rules for using fantasy-tinged corporate roles such as the 'Documancer' or 'Occultant,' as well as spells that incorporate royalty payments and backgrounds for sons and daughters of famous adventurers keen to make their own name in the world.

None of the options bring revolutionary new powers to play, but they're damned fun and have the chance to be genuinely funny too. This strong sense of humour and absurdity extends through the lengthy campaign that takes up much of the book's page count.

Rather than encountering just some faceless bandits, for example, the party run into a group led by a skeleton who refuses to believe she's long dead, instead loudly muttering about allergies. Later, an important contact in the piratical city of Luskan is attempting to revolutionise the industry with a line of peg-hands and foot-hooks.

Hidden behind this silly façade, however, is a genuinely well-written, well-structured story. It's heavily scripted in the very beginning and the nature of playing a franchise means the party is rarely in total control of their goals, but there are plenty of opportunities for players to forge creative paths through the melee.



If you're already a fan of the various *Acquisitions Incorporated* podcasts and games this is a wonderful supplement. Even if you aren't, it's still worth checking out if you want to bring absurd comedy to your weekly sessions.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES



LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS RPG: EMERALD EMPIRE

303 | 14+ | £40

Designer: Carman, Hobart, Sauer, Yoon, Farrese, Sun | **Artist:** Various

When a book is dominated by settings, locations and characters it usually falls squarely into the domain of the GM, but navigating the complex politics and social rules of Rokugan makes the detailed breakdown of *Emerald Empire* virtually required reading for Legend of the Five Rings players, too – the fact that it comes with a handful of new character options is just the icing on the cake.

Where the core rulebook was short on setting in favour of laying out the rules, *Emerald Empire* approaches things from the complete opposite direction. The overwhelming majority of the book is filled to the brim with facts, figures and fiction about everything from mighty castles to lonely fishing villages, with only one chapter containing new rules.

Players can use this to craft their backstories and build their relationships with the wider world, while GMs use it to fuel adventures and excitement throughout the campaign. A section on dark rituals and forbidden magic is particularly potent with possibilities and could easily end up forming the heart of a campaign or adventure.

One welcome addition throughout these background sections are semi-regular sidebars explaining how the beliefs, spirituality and cultural aspects of the Japan-inspired Rokugan relate to actual real-world customs. These are great primers for handling things with appropriate levels of respect and care, while still having fun at the table.

On top of learning more about their clan and the world they live in, players also get the chance to pick from a handful of new options. These include the chance to create a character from one of the imperial families – a choice that presents countless story threads for your GM to pluck on – and a pair of new monk disciplines, but perhaps the most interesting options are the Kitsune and the Kolat Saboteur. These are both roles that stand apart from the usual dynamic of a loyal and honourable party, starting the character off with a false identity and a whole heap of secrets to keep.

Emerald Empire is a resoundingly solid book and a must-buy for any adventurers looking to truly invest in the world of Rokugan. For once, the GM may even be able to get the players to chip in to buy it too.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

ODYSSEY OF THE DRAGONLORDS

A marvellous mess of myth

Designer: James Ohlen, Jesse Sky, Drew Karpyshyn | **Publisher:** Modiphius

466 | 15+ | £40



'Epic' is a word that gets thrown around pretty loosely these days, but it really is the only accurate way to describe *Odyssey of the Dragonlords*. By smooshing the world-shaking heroism of Greek myth into *Dungeons & Dragons*' high-powered fantasy it manages to conjure up a titanic adventure about battling vast monsters, treating with gods and claiming your place in the annals of history.

And, yes, despite carefully not mentioning it by name anywhere, *Odyssey of the Dragonlords* is explicitly meant to be played with *D&D*'s wildly popular fifth edition ruleset. It's just rather than being put out by the official *D&D* team, the book comes from a trio of writers drawn from the ranks of Bioware, one of the biggest names in RPG videogames.

The result is a chunky slab of a book that manages to bring a flavour of its own to the rather crowded world of fantasy adventuring. Part of this is the beautifully realised mythical setting, which comes with an absolute stack of new options for players and GMs alike, but the writing and design also manage to feel slick and snappy in a way that few other campaigns manage.

This might be the conformation bias talking, but you can kind of tell that the main body of the writing came from folks who cut their teeth in videogames. The structure of the campaign, which starts with the party being hailed as destined heroes and has them slowly unlock more of the world to explore over time, feels as though it could have been ripped right out of Mass Effect or Baldur's Gate. Even the climactic final showdown, which may well be one of the most dramatic, high-powered battles in any *D&D* campaign ever published, feels like something that could be accessed by clicking on a map screen.

Honestly, this is both a good and a bad thing.

For example, there's no denying that the linear design of the first few chapters – which translate into a couple dozen hours of gameplay – does a great job of keeping things zipping along at an impressive pace. Plus, the feeling of unlocking a whole new array of islands to visit or cities to explore is just satisfying at the tabletop as it is on any computer screen.

However, this does come coupled with an element of the dreaded railroading – the feeling that once the heroes start their journey, they're bouncing their way down a corridor rather than forging their own path. For long sections of the game the party head from one dungeon-crawl to another, retrieving magical McGuffins and having plot-relevant encounters when the book decides they're ready.

Indeed, the whole adventure opens with the party being named as the destined heroes, prophesised to save the world of Thylea and kick some titan arse. This is all supported by clever new rules that tie their epic destinies into the story, but all the talk of fate can sometimes feel like an excuse for leading the players around by their nose.

Still, if they are happy to tread the road set before them, the heroes are probably going to be in for a rather lovely journey. The book is stuffed with cool characters and clever little adventures, all of which are supported by a truly impressive array of Grecian-flavoured rules and tools.

Every single core *D&D* class, for example, gets a new sub-class to try out with an appropriately epic flavour. Barbarians, for example, get to wrestle and shoot like Hercules, while rangers get access to an Amazonian sub-class that turns them into an off-brand version of Xena or Wonderwoman.

It's a little hard to tell exactly how these stand up against their official brethren, but at the very least they look both fun and incredibly flavourful. Just reading through the book is enough to fill your head with ideas for cool characters, and even if you don't want to go full Grecian myth the hand-waved nature of the world means that you could very easily play a newly-arrived wandered from a more traditional fantasy world.

The Odyssey of the Dragonlords is a truly impressive piece of work that can offer multiple years of action-packed roleplaying that really does blend the epic heroism of Greek myth and the easy action of *D&D*. At times the writing might be a little too tight and the plot a little too slick, but if you're happy to be swept along in the current there's a whole lot of epic adventuring to be had with it.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

An incredibly ambitious piece of work that adds epic Grecian flavour to D&D's wizards and warriors.



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Go fight big things, save the world and bounce across the planet while doing epic nonsense.



HORROR GAMES

HELLO DARKNESS

HORROR IN DUNGEONS & DRAGONS

Lead writer Chris Perkins reveals how the vampiric villains and delightful dread of Ravenloft and Curse of Strahd helped the RPG's adventures discover a dark side

Words by **Sara Elsam**
Images courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

You stumble through the mists, lost inside a valley of eternal rain. In the distance, the vast crooked spectre of Ravenloft castle glowers. A mad, irredeemably murderous vampire prowls its corridors – and you can't shake the feeling he's watching you. Waiting.

Welcome to Barovia, the location of fifth-edition *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign *Curse of Strahd,* released in 2016. Unlike classic insta-death bonanza module *Tomb of Horrors* from 1978, *Curse of Strahd* invokes a different sort of horror entirely. Influenced by all things Gothic, Barovia is packed full of dread and yearning.

"It's a beautiful gloom," says *Curse of Strahd* designer and lead writer Chris Perkins. "Barovia strikes a balance between beauty and ghastliness. It's a study of contrasts. It's also very isolated; characters learn quickly that no-one can save them – they're on their own."

A far cry from other places in the *Dungeons & Dragons* world, Barovia has no tangible economy, and no welcoming party for the heroes. As you'd expect in a land where witches, wizards, flesh golems and psychotic angels run amok, the people have seen it all before.

The landscape features an eerie spectrum of horror locations: the swampy recesses of derelict town Berez, the malevolent trees and singing runes of Yester Hill, and the ruined splendour and crazed cultists of mini-dungeon murder factory the Death House.

"For me personally, I find Old Bonegrinder, the dilapidated windmill, terrifying – both the location and its sinister goings-on," highlights Perkins. "It invokes certain fairytales that disturbed me as a child and stuck with me into adulthood."

At Barovia's centre is its villain: Count Strahd von Zarovich, the ultimate big bad. Fuelled by powerful magic and fiendishly calculating, "that Devil" Strahd could murder the player characters at anytime. However, possessing a fatal hubris, he chooses to toy with them instead. Similar to the titular extra terrestrial of *Alien*, he can turn up at anytime, lashings of bloodshed in his wake. But like Gothic antihero Dracula, Strahd is not a happy boy.

"A good horror villain is fabulously evil and tormented," comments Perkins. "In Gothic horror fiction, the villain's torment is often self-inflicted; the villain becomes, ironically, a victim of their own monstrous nature and horrible acts."

Strahd's appeal lies in his arrogance: "He can't see who he truly is; as is the case with vampires, he looks in the mirror and sees nothing," continues Perkins. "He is a malignant narcissist trapped by his malignant narcissism – forever alone, forever feared and unable to change. He must be destroyed because salvation is beyond him."

Barovia is the mirror that reflects the true horror of its dark lord, according to Perkins, and everything in it



is touched and corrupted by Strahd in some way. The world itself continuously reveals new horrors relating to the vampire, like a grim canvas of Strahd's past.

Most characters in *Curse of Strahd*, NPCs and monsters alike, are grappling with something terrible. They've developed painful, and often dangerous, ways of surviving. Those that have not been driven mad are melancholy – resigned to their fate.

"In horror fiction, the villain is framed as inhumanity personified, often serving as a cautionary tale: once you lose your humanity, you can never get it back," Perkins says. "Other fantasy villains aren't usually burdened with that kind of terrifying reality."

And what better trope for humanity stripped to nothing than vampires, creatures consumed by parasitic hunger?

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

The origins of *Curse of Strahd* lie in '70s Provo, Utah. Couple Tracy Hickman and Laura Curtis – tired of mundane vampire tropes in *Dungeons & Dragons* – decided to create a genuinely frightening vampire-based adventure module. Back then, vampires sprung up somewhat unceremoniously as random encounters in dungeons, barring the starring role of the vampiric lizard ruler in *Tomb of the Lizard King* (1982).

Hickman and Curtis' *Ravenloft* was published by TSR in 1983 as a 32-page first edition adventure module. Eschewing the sword-and-sorcery traditions of the time, it was instead driven by the machinations of its dastardly villain, who would go on to become *Dungeons & Dragons*' most prominent vampire – and the source of the scourge in its world.

It went on to gain a sequel, and inspired a campaign setting of the same name in 1990. Part of the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* collection, the *Ravenloft* series expanded the world of Barovia – which is but one of many 'Domains of Dread' scattered about the Forgotten Realms universe. The second-edition series included a number of its own bestiaries (like *Van Richten's Monster Hunter's Compendium*) and a trove of modules; one adventure even has lycanthropic sea wolves.

Additionally, *Ravenloft* instalments featured 'Terror Tips' for the DM. These ranged from withholding secrets to taping plastic spiders to the underside of players' chairs and shaking aforementioned chairs in simulation of an earthquake.

The original designers of *Ravenloft* helped create *Curse of Strahd*, providing "30 years' worth of ideas" during creation, says Perkins. For example, the Amber Temple in *Curse of Strahd* was inspired by a Russian palace mentioned by Hickman. Classic horror stories like *The Island of Doctor Moreau* also proved influential.

Needless to say, the tips in *Curse of Strahd* are more subtle. Like *Ravenloft*, they advise maintaining a horror atmosphere that is occasionally broken with light humour.

BACK INTO THE DARK

Curse of Strahd is a unique *Dungeons & Dragons* adventure, a dark, unsettling unicorn of a campaign. It's also the only abashedly horror-themed long campaign. That said, there are horrifying elements at play in other adventure modules. Picture the seedy streets and undercover machinations of *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*, *Apocalypse Now*-style Underdark trip *Out of the Abyss* or adventuring through the Nine Hells in *Baldur's Gate: Descent into Avernus*. Horror in essence, is a key component of much adult fantasy.

However, *Dungeons & Dragons*, as a game inherently about player empowerment, is not a natural fit for horror. As a genre, horror relies on disempowerment and vulnerability. Feelings of fear are invoked through a crushing of agency: things unseen and inescapable. It's a mechanic that horror-focused titles like *Call of Cthulhu* and the diceless *Dread* structure themselves around. These are games where permadeath lurks around every corner.

It's hard to do this in the *Dungeons & Dragons* world, at least in its latest incarnation. Culturally, we've shifted from 'total party knockout' machines like *Tomb of Horrors*. Nowadays, player characters operate as godlike figures of super strength and magic. They shape the world around them.

Yet, *Curse of Strahd* proves that a mix of strong writing and ingenious DMing can create an effective horror tale. Suitable dread is built through an evocative world, and canny manipulation of the environment and players. Players learn quickly that rushing in swords a blazing leads to death – or something far worse.

Horror is about emotion, and Barovia itself is pure dread. A place where the sun no longer shines, and hollow-eyed villagers gather in protective circles, waiting for the wolves. A place perhaps, where we are forced to confront our own darkness.

FIVE FRIGHTS

Lead writer Chris Perkins reveals his top tips for running a horror campaign in Dungeons & Dragons

1. DON'T REVEAL TOO MUCH

"Horror comes from the unknown. Once you've seen the horrible thing, it becomes less horrible. As a DM running a horror-themed game, I cling to the unknown and keep players in the dark as long and as often as possible. As one monster reveals itself, it's good to have another unknown waiting in the wings."

2. SET THE MOOD

"How one sets the scene and describes things to the players is important for laying the groundwork and invoking the appropriate mood. The voice of the DM, the crispness of the details, the deliberate obscuring of details – all of these can help create tension and suspense."

3. VARY THE DEGREES OF TENSION

"The DM also needs to dial down the horror at times, putting the players at ease just long enough for the tension to start ramping up again. Peaks and valleys – all stories have them. You can't keep players on their edges of their seats perpetually in a horror-themed game. They need to let down their guard, so that the horror can creep up on them again."

4. EXPERIMENT WITH DIFFERENT HORROR STYLES

"I think it's okay to challenge the players' expectations of what horror is. Surprising them with new flavors of primal horror is something *Curse of Strahd* strives to accomplish, insofar as the locations featured in the adventure each handle horror differently."

5. ENSURE YOUR PLAYERS ARE INVESTED

"What makes an amazing horror campaign is more than words on a page: it requires investment and commitment on the part of the game's participants. Eerie background music and a few candles might help, but nothing spoils a perfectly good horror moment like players being silly."



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

USING PUBLISHED

In RPGs, doing things by the book doesn't mean doing everything by the book. Here's how readymade adventures can be a shortcut to the action – and why you shouldn't always follow them to the letter

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

A giant was coming to town – a huge, lumbering thing as tall as a house and deadly as a landslide. Last week it had been bought off with an enormous feast of sheep and cattle, but now the barns were empty and the people had nothing left to sate its endless hunger. Worse, the only adventurers to respond to their call for aid were far too inexperienced to deal with the beast themselves.

By a strange coincidence, however, the town elders told stories of a famous giantslayer who'd built her house nearby. It was on the far side of an enchanted forest filled with monsters and traps that were appropriately deadly for the fledgling heroes but, if they were able to meet with her, she could prove an invaluable ally in the battle against their oversized foe.

And she probably would have been, if the party had actually gone to speak to her.

Instead, they launched into an impassioned speech about how the townspeople could overcome any adversity if they put their minds to it – how they couldn't always rely on others to defend their homes. They weren't going to find a giantslayer, they declared, because they were going to *become* giantslayers – and so was everyone able to fire a bow or throw a stone.

With one day left before the monster returned, the adventurers set their minds to a grand plan. They would organise a militia from the various factions vying for control of the town, set a huge array of traps in the giant's path and use whatever cunning tricks they could muster to level the playing field.

A conversation with an old healer revealed that potent poisonous mushrooms grew in the enchanted forest so, while their allies dug spike pits and set tripwires, the party set off in search of a brew powerful enough to bring their foe low. Along the way they ran into a handful of beasties and other monsters that – strangely enough – were near-identical to those they would have encountered on a trip to the giantslayer's cottage.

In the end two of the heroes were squished by the giant's tree-trunk of a club, killed outright by its earth-shattering force. A handful of hunters, farmers and other civilians were also lost when the giant started tossing boulders at the makeshift defences, but once the mind-warping poison the party had retrieved from the forest began to kick in there could be little doubt as to the final result. It fell with the fighter's blade in its chest, never to threaten the town again.

Many miles away, sat in her lonely cottage, a famous giantslayer was feeling strangely bored and restless, as though she was meant to be somewhere.

HITTING THE BOOKS

Some of the most famous – and infamous – pieces of RPG history come in the form of published campaigns, adventures and quests. From *D&D*'s freeform *Keep on the Borderlands* and deadly *Tomb of Horrors* through to *Call of Cthulhu*'s titanic *Masks of Nyarlathotep,* countless gaming groups across the world have spent many happy years exploring worlds laid out in ink and paper.

Choosing to run published material has many advantages over trying to pull a campaign from the ether. Perhaps the biggest are that you can usually rely on quality writing and well-structured arcs, and that it usually cuts down on the GM's already substantial workload. On top of this, you also get access to maps, handouts and a guarantee that the battles and encounters you drop on the players are usually fairly balanced – in systems that care about that kind of thing, anyway.

However, one of the true appeals of tabletop



MATERIAL

As well as playing pre-made scenarios in full, it's often worth borrowing or adapting elements you like for your own creations

roleplaying is the freedom it offers. When you get into character almost anything can happen, and every now and then this takes the adventure off the page and into the blank space beyond.

Sometimes this happens because the players come up with a new idea or follow some unexpected path the writers didn't prepare for, and sometimes it's sparked off by the GM's own plans. What happens if you want to play a low-level quest with an overpowered party, for example? Do you follow the plot exactly and have the players plough through the puny challenges before them, or do you tinker with the campaign you just dropped £40 on?

Reaching beyond the letter of the law can be an intimidating experience, but so much of the anxiety that comes with this can be erased by a shift in perspective. Published campaigns and adventures aren't prescriptive tunnels for you to channel the party through; they're just another tool for you to use – a pretty substantial one, sometimes, but a tool nonetheless.

RESKIN, REUSE, RECYCLE

There are two major parts of an RPG. The first is the mechanical side of things – the amount of hit points a creature has, how hard it is to open a lock, etc. The second is how we relate that to the fiction, such as linking those stats to a dragon or deciding that you need a pick to open the lock.

The mechanical aspect of the game is usually pretty fixed, and if it isn't then fiddling with the numbers can be time-consuming. The fiction, however, is almost completely within our hands.

When an adventure throws a powerful dragon at the party there's nothing stopping us from reimagining it as a clanking war machine that shoots gouts of flames from the barrel of a cannon rather than breathing it out. An orcish horde can be replaced by axe-wielding Vikings, a wizard's spells by a computer hacker's many tools and gadgets.

This can be applied to entire adventures or just a handful of aspects of them. Perhaps you're running a techno-magical campaign and want to drop the *Giantslayer* adventure into the mix one night, so you switch the monster into a rampaging war-beast who's plundering towns for spare parts and power rather than food.

Not everybody wants to fiddle with the setting, of course. Sometimes they just want to run things as written, but find that things are taking an unexpected direction.

In that case, one simple way to keep things going without crowbarring the party back to the expected direction is to shift things around. If they missed a dungeon in the first chapter, put it in your pocket until they need to track something down in the second or third. Reuse the encounters they were meant to run into on their way through the forest on their journey to the mushroom grove.

This doesn't just work with battles and enemies, of course. Perhaps they took an unexpected amount of interest in a shopkeeper because you improvised a silly voice – well, that sounds like an ideal time to shift things around behind the scenes and switch their role in the story with a pre-written NPC. Won't they be surprised when they find out that the bumbling potion-seller is secretly the head of the thieves' guild!

Finally, one of the great things about pre-written campaigns and adventures is the fact that you don't even need to be playing them to recycle bits and pieces of them. If you see a questline or location that could be a fit for your homebrew world, you shouldn't hesitate to shamelessly steal it and make it you own.

The endless lairs and caves found in the latest *D&D* campaign book, *Waterdeep: Dungeon of the Mad Mage*, are ideal for this kind of thing, but plenty of more open-ended campaigns are rife with ideas to borrow. Heck, you don't even need to feel constrained to stick to the same system or even genre – an ethical dilemma for a Federation crew in *Star Trek Adventures* isn't going to lose its potency just because it's posed to a band of airship-bound adventurers in a steampunk-themed game of *Genesys*.

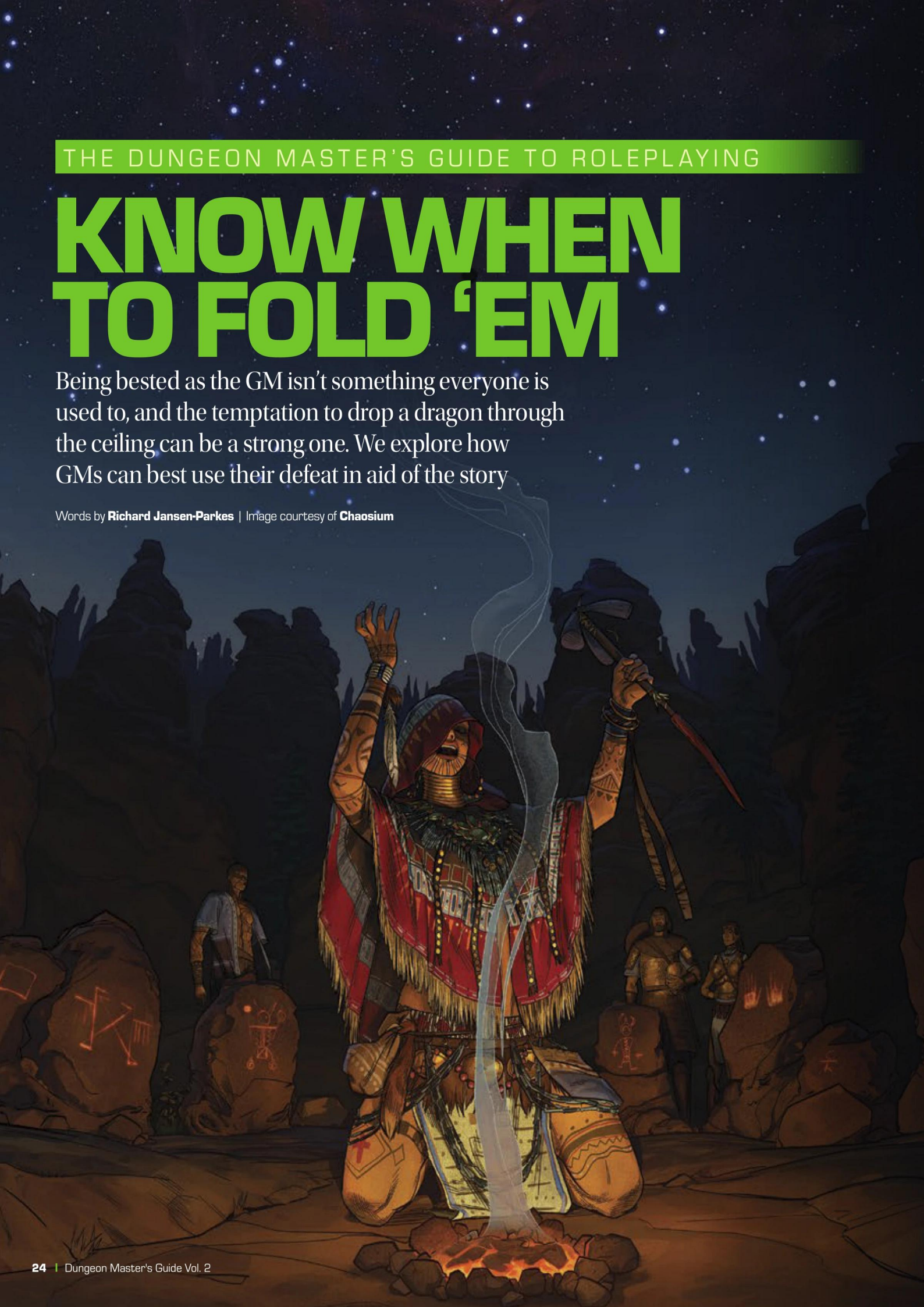
There are some folks in the hobby who have a rather low opinion of using published content, as though it's somehow cheating or lacking in artistic integrity. However, sharing ideas and stories has always been one of the most exciting things about playing games like this, and playing though campaigns and adventures dreamed up by another feels like just another aspect of that.

And remember: if all else fails, just throw a giant at the party. It usually works out one way or another.

KNOW WHEN TO FOLD 'EM

Being bested as the GM isn't something everyone is used to, and the temptation to drop a dragon through the ceiling can be a strong one. We explore how GMs can best use their defeat in aid of the story

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Chaosium**



The scene was all set for a truly climactic showdown. The magical map the heroes desperately needed was locked up in the personal cabin of Red Bess, the Pirate Queen, and by a stroke of chance it happened that the stateroom where all the campaigns' villains had gathered to loudly discuss their plans was right next door.

If everything went to plan, there would be a pitched battle raging all across the ship. Swashbucklers would slice their way down the sails with magical daggers, sailors would swing across the decks on highly convenient ropes and rigging. With a bit of luck the party's rogue would end up skirmishing with a mysterious bodyguard – whose true identity could make for a great end-of-fight revelation.

The plans weren't exactly laid down in stone – there were way too many variables for that to be even vaguely sensible – but the broad arc for the night was pretty solidly sketched out. Bit of sneaking, bit of stabbing, bit of storytelling.

Except that's not what happened.

Instead, our merry band of heroes stuck their heads together and conjured up a really rather clever plan. It involved calling in some favours from allies in the nearby port town, an incredibly explosive distraction and a potion of invisibility that had been stuck at the bottom of the fighter's backpack for several months now.

There was still plenty of room for things to go wrong, of course, and for that awesome fight to kick off anyway. However, by taking some sensible risks and generally nailing every unexpected challenge the pirate queen and her guards had in store for them, the rogue was able to waltz into her bedroom, thieve her magical map and get the hell out of there without anyone anybody realising what had happened.

From some certain perspectives it was a rather anti-climactic affair, but the party didn't care. Their mission had been a total success, they'd recovered their treasure, and nobody had gotten even slightly shot. It was, they all agreed, a lot of fun.

STRUGGLING WITH SUCCESS

There are many things that GMs find difficult, such as trying to remember the grappling rules seven hours into a mammoth session or getting all your players in the same room at the same time for once. However, one of the tasks I find the hardest comes when the heroes come up with a plan that's unexpected, clever and very likely to succeed.

Simply put, it can be hard as hell to just let the heroes win, even when they deserve it.

The issue isn't that they're being unpredictable – that's something you learn to live with as soon as you pick up your extra-evil GMing dice – but rather that it sets up a conflict within my instincts.

On the one hand, I want to reward players for being clever and to allow their decisions to have a tangible impact on the game world. On the other, I desperately want to throw unexpected obstacles in their way and make sure they get to experience all the awesome story elements, fights and shiny treasures buried in those encounters they're going to skip past.

In many ways these second sets of instincts are much stronger than the first. After all, it's a hell of a lot of fun to throw spanners in the works that are the players' plans; to suddenly reveal that the mob contact they're plotting with is wearing a wire, to forcibly remind that party that the young dragon they just slew has a mother nearby and she's pissed.

On top of this, the idea of just tossing all your notes for the session into the bin and haring off with the new slant on the night can be damnably frustrating. In these kind of situations it can be very easy to invoke the world-shaking powers of GM fiat – to shift things around so that the air vents the team plans to sneak in through are sealed with a super-secure laser grid, or to decide that one of the pirate guards just happens to be outfitted with a Lantern of Revealing that renders invisibility pointless.

Easy, yes. Right? Probably not.

> "The complications we throw in to heighten the tension should be appropriate to the story and something that makes the plan a little trickier rather than derailing it entirely"

OF SPANNERS AND SOLUTIONS

Good stories rarely feature everything going right for the heroes. Having them waltz in, beat up the baddies and waltz out again without any danger or surprise is rather boring.

However, most stories also don't feature omnipotent villains who immediately thwart every clever plan the heroes dream up either. Sure, it's fun to have the occasional horrible reveal or sickening moment when the team realise they've wandered into a trap, but if that's all you get it soon becomes frustrating.

This is especially true when it comes to the world of RPGs – especially those that still push the 'game' side of things alongside the 'roleplaying'. Success in those games, whether we're talking about *Pathfinder* and *D&D* or *Shadowrun* and *Star Wars*, rarely comes down to just the luck of the dice. Players making clever tactical or social decisions should probably be a factor too.

If our reaction to these unexpected gambits is to toss them back into the players' faces, along with some unlikely danger they could never have accounted for, we're essentially dismissing their decisions. We're saying that it doesn't matter how well they plan things, it's still going to go wrong.

Does this mean that every plan more complex than "charge!" should be showered with rewards and success? Not necessarily, but the complications we throw in to heighten the tension should be appropriate to the story and something that makes the plan a little trickier rather than derailing it entirely.

For example, a convenient *Lantern of Revealing* is something that ruins the party's sneaky plans. Finding that the Pirate Queen's boyfriend is having a bath in her cabin is something that makes it just a bit harder.

REUSE & RE-CYCLE

Finally, as you tearfully watch the party sneak in through the back, or cash in some favours to get forged credentials that will let them stroll into the corporate HQ rather than kick in the doors, remember that just because content has been skipped over that doesn't mean it's been destroyed for good.

If you had a sweet battle or cool NPC planned out, you can just lift them from their hidey-hole and slap them down somewhere further down the line.

That cool bodyguard the rogue was meant to run into? They ended up in a high wire duel a couple of sessions later, as the Pirate Queen ordered him to steal back her map. In truth, it actually worked out even better than the original fight would have, as the bodyguard got to raise the stakes by shanking one of the heroes' buddies on the way into their base.

Plus, all those pirates who survived the night rather than ending up as background casualties in a cool firefight are still serving their queen. That makes me more than justified in adding some extra bodies onto the battlefield when the real showdown eventually plays out, right?

LONDON FALLING

Victorian steampunk, Lovecraftian horror and tales of whimsy and weirdness welcome you to Fallen London, the roleplaying world of your twisted dreams

Words by **Matt Jarvis**



London has been stolen by bats and dragged deep beneath the surface of the Earth onto the shore of a huge underground sea. In the world of Fallen London, that's before the weirdness even begins.

Fallen London first surfaced in the online text adventure of the same name, a gothic and darkly comic branching narrative that presented a city to roam where devils and squid-people were the norm. In the decade since, Failbetter Games' horrifying and humourous vision of Victorian England has expanded to sail the surrounding subterranean 'Unterzee' in the naval odyssey *Sunless Sea* and chug across the stars above in a space locomotive in this year's sequel *Sunless Skies*.

The computer games combined dense paragraphs of atmospheric text with the open player-directed storytelling of choose-your-own-adventures and, in the case of *Sea* and *Skies*, more action-orientated exploration as players' vessels engaged in combat with roaming attackers or monstrous creatures lying in wait between ports.

"It's like you're swimming in this huge sea of stories and sort of interesting bits of flotsam and jetsam float past you and you decide which ones you want to grab onto for a while," says narrative director Chris Gardiner.

Thousands of words of original world-building and lore built up over a decade made the *Fallen London* universe ripe for a tabletop RPG – fans began requesting one almost immediately following the first game's release – but it was an intimidating task for the relatively small team to tackle.

"We know that our fanbase, what they have been clamouring for, bless them, is a full-on *Fallen London* roleplaying game and lore book. Like a big, bloody, massive, heavy tabletop hardback that's a bunch of rules and hundreds of pages of lore and art and stuff," Gardiner says. "Obviously we weren't going to be able to do that – that would be a whole new project!"

TO THE SKIES

Failbetter turned to Grant Howitt and Chris Taylor, two-thirds of indie roleplaying studio Rowan, Rook & Decard and the creators of numerous quick-playing, easy-to-learn RPGs, many of which fit on a single side of A4. Together, the teams began to shape a game that would retain the spirit of the *Fallen London* series – Gardiner reveals that they experimented with a *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*-style shared storytelling format, as well as a narrative-focused game that involved players drawing on a central map – without terrifying newcomers with "50 pages of dense Victorian prose".

"We wanted it to be very pick-up-and-playable," Gardiner says. "Some people who play it will be experienced tabletop gamers who are now getting the chance to play in our world. The other bunch of people will be people who like our worlds but have never had a chance to do tabletop gaming. We wanted something really accessible for them that didn't require a lot of engrained background knowledge about tabletop roleplaying games."

While Howitt and Taylor's *Fallen London* RPG, *Skyfarer*, is a good deal longer than a single page, it also excises much of the setting's lore, offering up a rules-light way of telling stories set in the universe that captures its distinctive tone. In an equivalent to the diverse classes of a traditional roleplaying party, players take on the roles of crewmembers on one of *Sunless Skies*' space locomotives, with the GM acting as their out-of-action captain.

"We wanted to make a point of saying: 'The skies are yours now, do what you want with them,'" Gardiner says. "That also kind of fits quite well with the sort of response players often have to our games, because our narrative is kind of fragmented and it's not linear, and different bits of it come together to form a story."

As they venture into the High Wilderness – the space-like constellation of floating ruins and ports that makes up the game's map – characters will inevitably begin to suffer peril as the result of their unsettling surroundings and misfortunes, eventually putting them in danger and leaving them at the mercy of the unforgiving expanse. As with the black wit of *Sun* and *Skies*, even the grimmest of fates (eating your crew is among the better outcomes) can raise some chuckles.

> "Our work lies at the intersection of horror and whimsy. The two things enhance each other."

"The term that I keep coming back to now to describe our work is that it lies at the intersection of horror and whimsy," says Gardiner. "The two things enhance each other. They undermine each other in surprising ways, so they help prevent you going too far into clichés: horror or comedy. They also enhance and heighten the emotion you get, I think, because you're bouncing from one to the other and it leaves you just a little bit unbalanced and unsure what's going to happen next."

FARE THEE WELL

Skyfarer was released for free last September as a teaser in the run-up to *Sunless Skies*' launch on PC at the beginning of this year.

"The idea for us was that people would play a bit of *Sunless Skies* and then say, 'Oh, I want to do this in tabletop,'" Gardiner says. "And they would feel free to make the sort of story they had experienced in *Skies*, which might be quite different to the sort of story that someone else who had played it had got or that we would've written for them."

Despite the RPG's relatively light ruleset and reliance on players to bring the bulk of *Fallen London* lore to campaigns and scenarios themselves – outside of a brief supplement of short creative prompts written by Gardiner to accompany the core rules – Failbetter considers *Skyfarer* as a promising first step onto the tabletop.

"The most telling thing about the way it's been received is that there's a channel on [chat app] Discord for it, and the beauty of it is that it's still active now," says communications director Hannah Flynn. "People are still playing and they have campaigns going and they share stories about what they've been doing in their vessel."

With *Skyfarer* having finally given *Fallen London* fans a taste of what might be possible for the setting on the tabletop and whetted the appetite of pen-and-paper roleplayers visiting the sunken city for the first time, Gardiner reveals that its creators are just as keen as players to dive deeper.

"This is not a plan, right – I want to make that very clear, we don't have any plans about this right now," he responds carefully. "But I would love it if we did some more tabletop-related stuff with the *Fallen London* universe. I think tabletop RPGs are the perfect fit for it, but board games and stuff could also be cool.

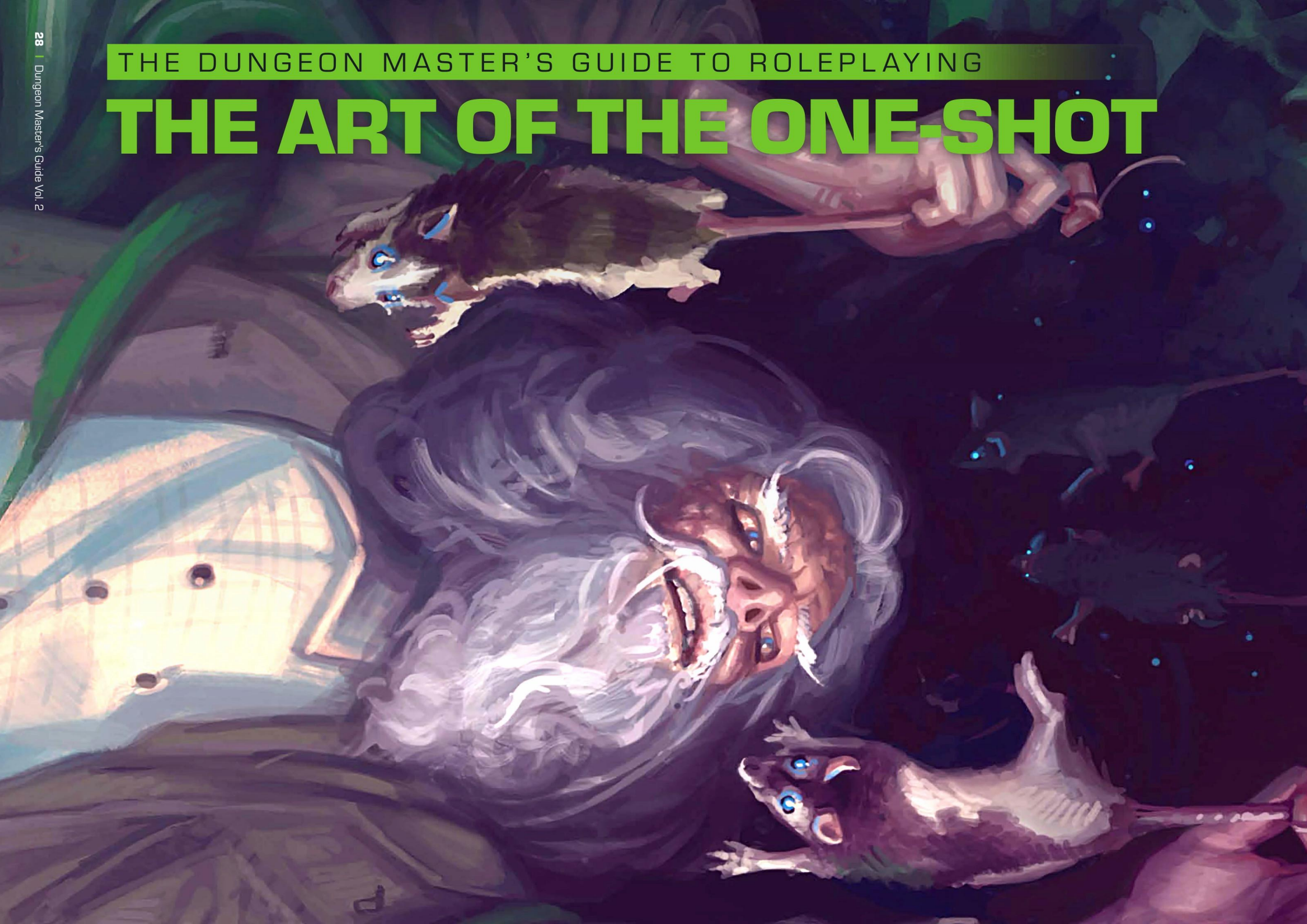
"It would have to walk a fine line of empowering players to make this universe their own, while also providing what is a very dense and tonally specific and obtuse body of lore and turning that into creative prompts and useful material – rather than something that's so intimidating you don't dare set foot in this world in case you get it wrong. Which is sometimes a problem that licensed roleplaying games can have, especially when there's a big chunk of lore behind them. We don't make tabletop roleplaying games; that's not our area of expertise. We'd want the right partner to do that with. We'd want a company that had worked with IPs before and had taken that kind of respectful but ingenious approach to using lore and turning it into a tabletop setting.

"If we did more tabletop RPGs, our fans are pretty clear that they want that big book. That would be a really cool thing. I would love to see that book."

You can download the digital edition of Skyfarer: A Sunless Skies RPG for free at ***ttgami.ng/skyfarer****.*

THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

THE ART OF THE ONE-SHOT



Not every tabletop adventure has to be an epic. Simple, short and standalone scenarios can be the perfect way to spend a few hours in a world old or new

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Chaosium**

When the adventure started it rather took our heroes by surprise. They were meant to be taking a rare day off from slaying demons and delving dungeons, so were relaxing in the pub when an unusually determined sheep barged its way through the doors and dumped a magical scroll at their feet.

The scroll, it transpired, unlocked a magical spell that allowed the assembled heroes to suddenly interpret the frantic bleating as common words. Their woolly companion claimed to be a powerful wizard who had been cruelly and callously transfigured by his apprentice for some imagined – he claimed it was imagined, anyway – slight.

Before they could quiz the sheep – the creature surprisingly smug for one that'd spent the last few months eating grass – it was seized by a band of roving ne'er-do-wells who claimed it as their own. The quiet tavern turned into a battlefield, and soon the party's day off had become an impromptu quest to figure out exactly what the hell was going on.

Over the next few hours they concocted a madcap plan involving a flock of entirely mundane rams, fought an insane mage's transfigured bed and found out exactly what it is that magical bears do in the woods. The afternoon culminated in a decision to leave their new client in his ovine form, rather than risk using a damaged magical device that could cause him to explode into a screeching lump of twisted flesh.

When it was over the heroes headed back to their quiet table, apologised to the staff for all the bloodstains on the furniture and started planning their next venture into the wilderness. It had been, they all agreed, a very busy day.

ONE & DONE

There are some adventures that span the centuries: epic quests whose origins lie in ancient prophecy and the careful planning of gods and demons. Sometimes, however, you don't have the epochs to spare for such a titanic struggle. Sometimes you need to squeeze an exciting adventure into just an afternoon. This, my friends, is the realm of the one-shot.

Considering that it's such a simple subject, the definition of a one-shot is surprisingly muddy. The core idea is that it should be a game, adventure or module that's neatly self-contained and can ideally be run end-to-end in just one session.

Of course, exactly what counts as a reasonable session length can vary pretty widely depending on whom you speak to and what the context is. Sometimes this might mean an entire eight- to 12-hour day of solid gaming, while other one-shots need to fit into a 90-minute slot at a show or convention.

Even the reason for running a one-shot will depend on the group. Many folks use them to feel out a new system or setting; plenty of starter adventures essentially count as slightly complicated one-shots.

Other times we turn to them because time and circumstance don't allow for anything longer. If we want to introduce a buddy to tabletop RPGs or run a quick adventure for a bunch of strangers at a store there's probably little point in playing through the opening three pages of a multi-year, globetrotting campaign.

And sometimes we play them because they're quick, easy fun. No commitment, no need to write up a backstory that your friends will pick over for the next 100 game nights – and if you end the game with the entire party buried up to their necks in fallen masonry there's no reason to worry.

Despite their simplicity and the relative ease of playing a one-shot, however, writing and running them smoothly does require a slightly different approach to a normal game.

RUNNING FAST

If there's just one piece of advice that people take from this column, let it be this: make sure there's an ending.

These games are supposed to be one-shots after all, with an emphasis on the 'one' part of things. Few things are more irritating than ending mid-adventure when you know that you'll never pick things up again, with the loose threads of your quest drifting off into oblivion.

It can be a strain on your improvisation skills, but when you see the clock ticking up towards your cut-off point you need to do whatever it takes to wrap things up. If the heroes are two rooms into a cavernous dungeon, turn the next room into the villain's throne room. If they're investigating a monstrous eldritch cult and are struggling to piece the clues together, have bad guys with a curious amount of pertinent info leap from the shadows with daggers raised.

Sometimes this can feel a little cheap and reek of deus ex machina, but if the alternative is leaving a sour, unsatisfied feeling in everyone's gullets… well, sometimes you need to pick the lesser of two evils.

Fortunately, with a properly structured plan this shouldn't be too hard to achieve. If you've ever played a tabletop RPG, though, you'll know just how unpredictable some groups can be. Left to their own devices, many parties would happily spend the first three hours of a four-hour slot shopping and haggling pennies off the price of a new laser rifle.

On the plus side, the need to keep thing moving can make one-shots an excellent training ground for improving your own skills at pacing games. Don't worry about cutting through dawdling or hour-long speculations and discussion roundtables. Throw new enemies, allies and situations at the players any time they hit a dead end or start to hesitate.

A SOLID START

One of the ways to ensure that you meet a solid ending is to make sure that you start off with a bang and get the players heading towards their destination as early as possible.

This may sound eerily close to the dreaded idea of 'railroading' – forcing the players down a narrow path of your own creation rather than allowing them to find their own. And this is because it kind of is. Kind of.

Whenever I run a one-shot, no matter what system or genre I'm working with, I make sure to dump them in the action as soon as possible.

If we're playing *Dungeons & Dragons* and they're on a quest then the adventure starts with them entering the tavern where they'll meet their contact, standing outside the dungeon or – in one particularly memorable case – waking up in the Nine Hells with only hazy memories of how they got there. If the game is *Tales from the Loop* or *Call of Cthulhu,* then the characters are sucked into the mystery within the first two minutes of hitting the ground.

Whenever I run the adventure with the sheepish wizard, the party is usually drawn into a fight in the very first scene – once they've started stabbing people on behalf of their new friend it's hard for them to back out. This naturally leads them down a path that leads to a confrontation with the apprentice and their bag of magic tricks – and, with a bit of luck, everything is neatly wrapped up without about three-and-a-half hours or so.

STRANGER THINGS

Tales from the Loop's beautiful art, exciting premise and subtly Scandinavian tone helped the game sweep roleplaying awards and top countless 'Best of' lists. Get ready to meet its darker, moodier teenage cousin

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**



You don't get too many follow-ups in the world of roleplaying. You get new editions, designed to wipe away the old and welcome in the new, but rarely do you get something that feels like a direct continuation – the *Dark Knight* to a *Batman Begins*. And yet, that's exactly what *Things from the Flood* feels like.

"We call it a sequel game," explains Tomas Härenstam, CEO of the RPG's Swedish developer Free League. "It's completely standalone but it continues to expand the universe – in time if not in space. We actually have the same thing with our *Mutant: Year Zero* games, with four standalone titles in that range.

"Perhaps you could call it a sister to *Tales from the Loop*. It's hard to work out the exact terminology."

As you might expect from two games tied so closely together, *Things from the Flood* has roughly the same premise as its progenitor: a bunch of youths investigating weird goings-on in an alternate, sci-fi-tinged version of our own reality. Where *Tales from the Loop* looked at pre-teens exploring the optimistic world of the 1980s, this time things are moved on by a few years.

The kids are suddenly teenagers, caught between the surety of adulthood and the safety of childhood. The world around them has aged too, moving into the 1990s and introducing the players to grunge music, girl power and the wonders of PC gaming.

"We followed the time," says Härenstam. "Moving into the '90s brings along a whole different source of inspiration – they're quite different from the '80s. We loved the weird vibe from things like *Twin Peaks*, for example. On top of that the kids are older and that brings a darker, creepier tone."

OLDER, WISER, DARKER

He's not wrong. Many things have changed in the rough decade between the games, and the happy days of friendly robots and stumbling across dinosaur eggs in the woods seem to be long gone.

The Loop – the titular research facility that accounts for most of the weird phenomena – is all-but erased from sight, buried beneath a morass of brackish floodwater and sealed off from the public. Machinery developed from its breakthroughs is erupting with hideously organic growths and fluids, AI independence movements in Russia have led to a brutal government crackdown and the grown-ups in your home town all seem to be acting weird. Weirder than usual, that is.

Everywhere you look in *Things from the Flood* things are changing, and not always for the better.

One of the reasons for this, explains Härenstam, is that the shift in mood mirrors what many Swedes were experiencing around the time in our own reality.

"It's hard to separate the tone of the era from the countries that it's set in," he admits. "In Sweden the '90s were a time of big change. That was when Sweden opened up to the outside world – suddenly we had commercials on television! Before that it was state-controlled TV with only two channels.

"There was a lot of change, a huge shift in power throughout the country. And we thought that paralleled the changes that teenagers underwent at that time, leaving childhood and becoming adults.

"Of course, when we looked at building our US version of the setting, the parallels weren't quite so clear, so we had to consider that a little differently."



Along with older characters, *Things from the Flood* features more mature themes and gameplay – including the potential for its heroes to die

DEATH IN THE WATER

Things from the Flood is a dark and often dangerous experience. Where the mysteries in *Tales from the Loop* were knockabout adventures that might land you in trouble with your parents or with a warning from the local police, the stakes are an awful lot higher this time around.

Indeed, one of the news announcements sent out in the lead-up to the game's release ended its headline with a stark warning: "THIS TIME YOU CAN DIE." According to Härenstam, the team didn't make the decision lightly.

"Nils Hintze was the lead designer for both games, and that's one point that we had a lot of discussions about," he explains. "How could we make that change mechanically?"

"I mean, there was nothing stopping you from killing off a kid in *Tales from the Loop* if you want to, but it would be all in the narrative – there are no rules that can kill a character. In *Things from the Flood* there's a mechanic for it."

Härenstam is quick to point out "it's not a particularly deadly game", though.

"We have things called scars that are permanent damage of a sort. If you get enough of these scars, there's a risk that you might die.

"Even then, the way we handle death is different from how it's handled in a normal fantasy game where you're simply killed in the middle of a fight. You're always given a chance to choose how you exit the story – to create some kind of final farewell that feels appropriate to the character.

"But the stakes are higher and the challenges more serious, so we wanted to make sure you could lose a character. It's important almost as much as a signal as it is a rule. The mere fact that it exists – the fact that you can die – puts that thought into the heads of players."

Beyond that, Härenstam says, the core systems between *Tales from the Loop* and *Things from the Flood* are "very, very close". You have the same attributes and mostly the same skills, and the mechanics around rolling dice are pretty much identical.

There are a few minor differences, however, and like those around character death they help to paint a picture of the world the Härenstam and his colleagues were working towards.

There's no luck mechanic anymore, for example, and where you had 'pride' in *Tales* – something you were really good at and really proud of – here you have a 'shame'. It fills the same kind of space in the rules but, rather than showing off something you're good at, you're trying to overcome something you're ashamed of – whether that's the fact that your dad's in prison or the way you feel about your appearance.

LOOK TO THE FUTURE

Over the next few months there will be a hardback release of *Things from the Flood* as well as a book of adventures set in both the '80s and '90s. Härenstam teases more products set in the shared universe; he's keen to make it clear that "it's not like we've abandoned *Tales from the Loop* – we still plan to put out supplements for it".

Beyond that? Well, Free League always has plans in motion below the surface, but anyone holding on for the noughties version starring disaffected twentysomethings is probably going to have to wait a while.

"We don't have any plans for a third game right at this moment," says Härenstam. "But we'll see. Both *Tales from the Loop* and *Things from the Flood* are based on art books by Simon Stålenhag and his third book – *The Electric State* – isn't set in the same universe. If we were to do a game based on that, it wouldn't be the same universe, but perhaps more of its own thing."



THINGS FROM THE FLOOD

Back in the Loop

Designer: Free League team | **Artist:** Simon Stålenhag

222 | 13+ | £35

The nineties were a weird time to be alive, weren't they? The radio would jump from the Spice Girls to the Prodigy, grown adults wore parachute pants without any trace of irony and who could forget the way your friends kept stumbling into weird mysteries involving psychotic robots and science gone horribly wrong. No? Okay, maybe that last bit is unique to the teens from *Things from the Flood*.

Things from the Flood stands somewhere between being a direct sequel and a particularly hefty expansion to the wildly successful *Tales from the Loop*. In many ways it feels like the original game reflected in a funhouse mirror, staying essentially the same but becoming a little taller, a bit broader and much, much more sinister.

Where the earlier game dropped you into the shoes of kids investigating sci-fi mysteries in the '80s, this time you take up the role of a bunch of mid-'90s teenagers. The core idea of sticking your nose into weird events while dealing with the trials and tribulations of everyday life is still present but, in moving from carefree youth to troubled, angst-ridden puberty, *Flood* has adopted a much darker, grittier and altogether moodier tone.

The sense of optimistic wonder that littered *Tales*' robots, hover-trucks and mysterious portals is mostly gone, wiped out by the titular flood that destroyed the mysterious Loop facility. Robots are revolting in Russia, malfunctioning machines are spontaneously growing flesh along their wiring and all the adults are acting particularly weird.

These weird and often disturbing phenomena are what drive the investigations and intrigues of *Flood*. A group might spend a few sessions tracking down a rogue android who's been abducting rough sleepers for bizarre experiments, for example, or searching for a missing classmate that everyone else in town has mysteriously forgotten.

Long stretches of these adventures can be driven along without the need for any dice, as the game retains a strong narrative focus, but sooner or later the teens are bound to run into trouble. When they do, the mechanics that keep things ticking over are simple and straightforward – though they've acquired a few interesting twists.

Whether they're sneaking past some security guards or clocking a rogue 'droid with a street sign, players build a pool of d6s based on their character's skills and stats and try to roll sixes. A straightforward task might require one success, while a shot at the near-impossible needs three.

So long as you're careful to stick to your strengths and take advantage of your surroundings you should have usually have a decent chance at passing the check, but life and luck aren't always that kind. If you fail your character might well end up with some kind of negative condition – and, if things go bad enough, they might leave the game completely. Sometimes this means they bleed to death in a snowy field, and sometimes it means child protection services catch wind of the broken bones and whisk them away to a foster home.

If that sounds a little bleak, that's because it is. *Things from the Flood* is a surprisingly dark game, largely because despite the sci-fi twists it has a much more accurate portrayal of teenage life than most films or TV shows. Drugs, sex and self-loathing all weave their way through the pages in a way that manages to be both refreshing and disturbing.

Where *Tales* had kids invoking their luck and pride to gain bonuses to their rolls, *Flood*'s teens instead rely on their shame and scars. It's not a particularly significant rule change in terms of how the game plays mechanically, but it has a huge impact on how it feels.

Importantly, the designers have recognised that there's much more to the teenage experience than writing depressing poetry and vomiting up your first Bacardi Breezer. There are plenty of moments of light and fellowship amidst the darkness, and they taste all the sweeter for the contrast.

Within *Flood*'s pages you'll find some incredible art, a solid mini-campaign and more '90s nostalgia than you can shake a slap-bracelet at. If you've played *Tales* you might balk at the idea of buying what amounts to a tweaked version of the ruleset, but this puts just enough of a spin on the game to make it a truly unique beast – one that's equal parts enchanting and horrifying.

Which makes it a pretty solid take on being a teenager, actually.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

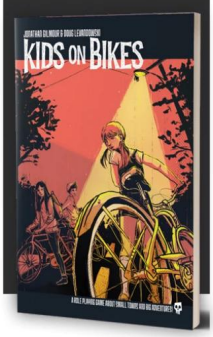


PLAY IT? YES

It's darker, deadlier and a little depressing in places, but this follow-up takes everything that made *Tales from the Loop* great and adds a new twist.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... KIDS ON BIKES

If you loved *Kids on Bikes*' blend of small-town mystery and supernatural danger, *Things from the Flood* might be right up your alley.



CITY OF MIST

Legends and lies in the big City

Designer: Amít Moshe | **Artist:** Various

497 | 13+ | £40

Some games are defined by their mechanics or their playstyle, others by the worlds they seek to recreate. By far and away the most enticing aspect of *City of Mist* is its tone – a fantastical spin on noir laid out in purple and black, bright neon and crackling parchment. It's a game for diehard story-lovers and storytellers – and though it's not the cleanest gaming experience out there, it has the potential to be one of the coolest.

The game is set somewhere in The City – always written with capitals – a modern metropolis packed to the gills with normal, everyday folks going about their normal, everyday lives. Woven between them, however, are those people touched by the mythos and imbued with the powers of mythical figures plucked from legends and fables. A woman locked up in a corporate tower may have the magic hair of Rapunzel, while an investment banker cursed by their own rampant success might inherit the power of Midas and his golden touch.

Only those touched by the mythos themselves can resist the mind-wiping effects of the titular Mist. Fortunately, that's a category that happens to include the player characters, each of whom is drawn to investigate the weird crimes and dangerous phenomena that are a by-product of a city crawling with heroes, monsters and demi-gods.

The sheer range of options this simple setup provides is almost impossible to grasp. Many games claim to only be limited by your imagination, but *City of Mist* comes a lot closer to actually achieving this than most.

For example, a team of investigators could include a fitness instructor with the strength and anger-management issues of Hercules, or a sinister librarian whose urban legend-inspired powers allow her to enter mirrors and find those who speak her name too many times. If you want, you could riff off stories drawn from *The Christmas Carol* or the dreamtime myths of Aboriginal Australians and everything in-between.

Many systems would crack under the weight of trying to balance all the powers and abilities these bring to the table, but *City of Mist* handles it by pretty much ignoring numbers entirely. Characters don't get stats or attributes to fiddle with; instead everything from their magical invulnerability to the car they drive is reduced to a series of simple tags – 'virtually unkillable' and 'old taxi-cab.' When you run into a situation that requires a check, whether that's punching a hole in a wall or convincing a cop to let you onto a crime scene, you just count up all the beneficial tags that apply and add that to your dice roll.

While this is wonderfully simple in theory it can get rather muddy in actual execution. At any one time a character will have four themes that define them – some mundane, some fantastical – each of which has four tags associated with it. On top of this you factor in statuses that can range from 'sleepy' to 'dead,' deal with a slew of environmental tags and manage a handful of meta-currencies.

All of this helps the game achieve story beats and reach for concepts that would be close to impossible in a more streamlined system, but that does some at the expense of the silky-smooth play usually enjoyed by games built on the same Powered by the Apocalypse framework that *City of Mist* uses. This isn't helped by the fact that the game's dedication to preserving immersion extends to the barrage of new phrases and terms created for its mechanics, not all of which are particularly intuitive.

Your heroes are 'rifts,' for example, while enemies are 'dangers' and experience is 'attention.' Getting familiar with the game requires the entire table to commit a glossary of new concepts to mind. In more conventional RPGs this would be considered pretty standard stuff not worth mentioning, but for a game that focuses so heavily on the storytelling side of things it's an unusually high hurdle.

Minor irritations like this, however, may be the price we need to pay for something as inventive as *City of Mist*.

The concept is a beautiful blend of gritty detective serial and Neil Gaiman's *American Gods,* with oodles of room for players and GMs alike to cannibalise their favourite stories, while the writing is sharp and solid. And – just in case there was any doubt remaining – the art and style are genuinely fantastic.

If you love stories, you'll probably love *City of Mist*. If you love stories that are about stories, that becomes a near-certainty.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

Style and drama ooze from every page of this beautiful book. It takes a little more effort to crack than most story-driven games, but when things click it offers something truly special.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... MONSTER OF THE WEEK

Both games use the same core mechanics and monster-hunting concept, but *City of Mist* amps up the drama and danger.

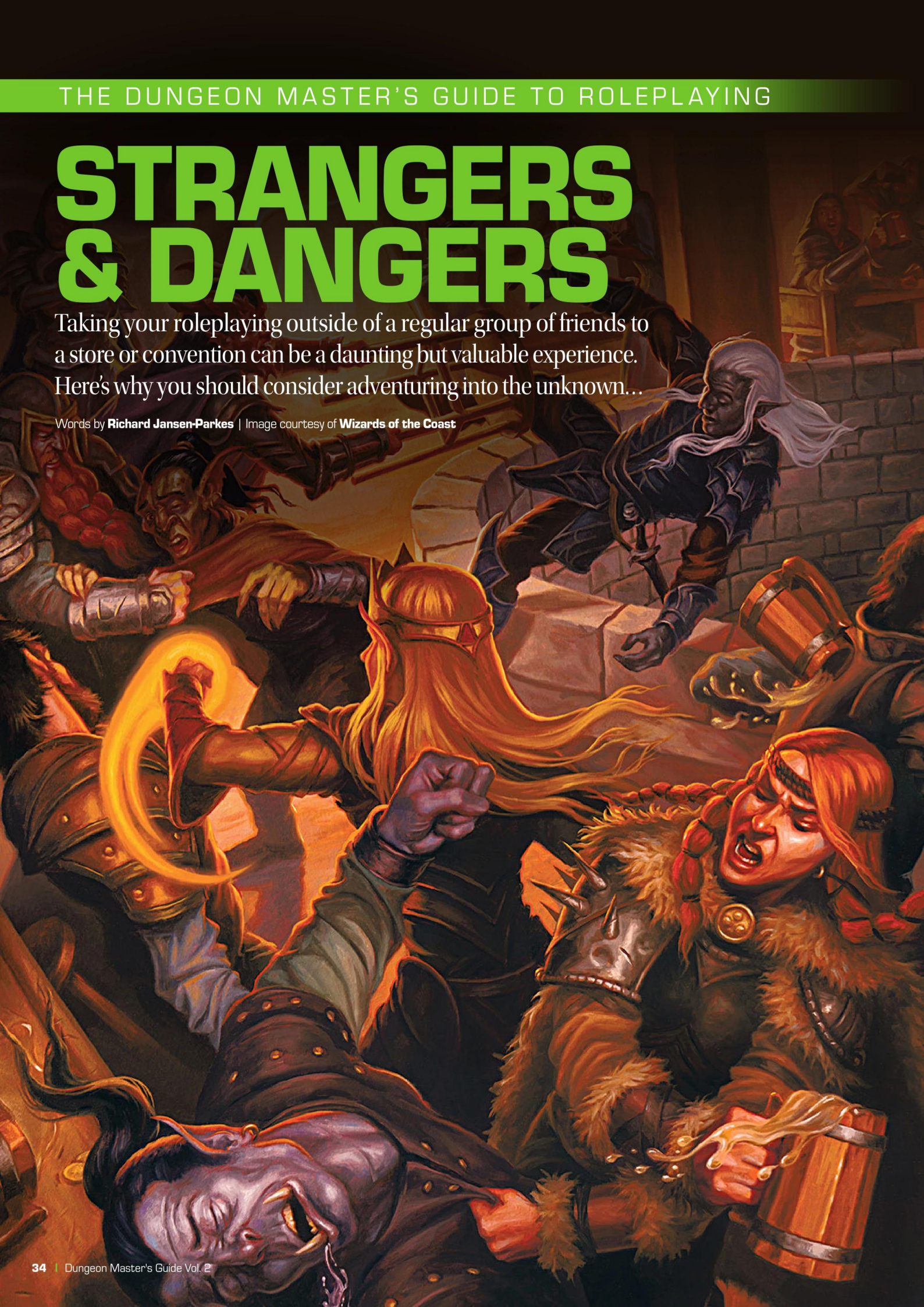




STRANGERS & DANGERS

Taking your roleplaying outside of a regular group of friends to a store or convention can be a daunting but valuable experience. Here's why you should consider adventuring into the unknown...

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**



I have long since ceased to be surprised by the weird and wonderful feats that can be achieved through a combination of lucky rolls and teamwork, but even now and then I can still be reduced to a long moment of gape-mouthed shock.

One of the most recent times I found myself in this state was during an already rather silly adventure where the party had come to the aid of an elven wizard who had found himself transformed into a sheep. His vengeful apprentice – the cause of the transformation – was hunting the woolly wizard and had offered a generous reward for his return.

I should have been tipped off to expect something weird was in the works when the party's rogue offhandedly asked roughly how much a normal sheep would cost. The alarm bells started properly ringing when they started adding up the gold and silver clattering about their well-stocked purses, and someone broke out a notepad to help with the maths.

And so it was that when the adventurers approached the magical tower that had once belonged to their fluffy client, they were accompanied by a herd of damn near 30 sheep, all contentedly bleating and baah-ing under the supervision of the animal-loving druid. As they travelled, the warlock experimented with her powers to change her appearance and added an array of gormless peasants to her repertoire, while the bard sorted out a dozen changes of clothing.

The rogue, who had masterminded much of the plan, was taking bets on how many visits from stubborn sheep-toting farmers the wizard's former apprentice could handle before going completely bananas. The consensus was somewhere around 20.

In the end, I think it took around a dozen arguments with the many-formed warlock, who always insisted that her sheep was definitely the one he was after, for the apprentice to storm off without bothering to go through the elaborate locking and warding process that protected the tower. After that, things got a little more traditionally-focused on stabbing and smashing, but the clever plan still allowed the party to skip a vast array of traps and dangers.

The most impressive thing about it all, however, was that the complex and interconnected scheme – a scheme that relied on every party member working to a common goal – wasn't pulled off by a group of friends that had gamed alongside one another for years.

In fact, most of them had never even laid eyes upon one another before they sat down at the table in the hotel conference room, having been thrown together by the strange tides and currents of the convention booking system.

IN STORES NEAR YOU

For several years, my approach to tabletop gaming was the same as my approach to debating politics and religion – it was something to be enjoyed with friends and family, behind closed doors.

As groups drifted and campaigns wavered, however, I found myself with an RPG itch I couldn't quite scratch, so I took a rather anxious and hesitant plunge into gaming groups at a local store. Wednesday night was open for the *D&D* Adventurers League, which seemed like the simplest thing to get into, so I made my way into town, armed with far too many dice, a couple of rulebooks and a throbbing sense of anxiety.

And I had a great evening. My halfling barbarian got to ride on the back of a half-orc and, for the most part, people were friendly and welcoming.

As time passed I naturally ended up behind the screen, and that was the point when I realised how much difference there can be when it comes to running for your friends at home, and for a group of near-strangers in public.

> "Sorting disputes out can be tricky but can help you to sharpen your DMing skills in the long run."

One of the biggest was the sudden realisation of time constraints. The sessions I ran in stores lasted two or three hours, while conventions stretched to four, but no matter how long they were it was vital that things actually be wrapped up when the clock struck time.

At home I could stretch the length of session by half an hour here or there and, with the consent of the group, a particularly vital or exciting session could spill over long past the usual time for packing things up. That doesn't work when there's a shop that need to be shut up, or when the table you're using is booked for another session that afternoon.

More than simply ending on time, the session also needed a satisfying conclusion. Stopping outside the dragon's lair and promising a conclusion next time doesn't really work when that could mean a year from now, or never.

As jarring as it was to begin with, this actually began to bleed back into my regular sessions with friends and influence them for the better. It taught me to always try and send the players home on a high (or a sufficiently dramatic low), rather than just letting it peter out around 11 o'clock.

GROUP DYNAMICS

There is more to running games in public than simply watching the clock, of course. One of the biggest differences from playing games with a group of friends is, simply, that the people you're playing with aren't friends.

This is important because tabletop RPGs can be a pretty intense experience. A truly wonderful session is often one where emotions ride high and the players are truly involved and invested in their characters, and when the group isn't all operating on the same wavelength things can get messy.

The vast majority of group conflicts and confusion I've encountered are caused by minor things that can be smoothed over – such as a player coming from a home group that uses a house rule that they didn't realise wasn't universal. The biggest of these is the difference in expectations, where one player is after a simple dungeon-crawl while another wants to throw themselves into political intrigue.

Sorting these disputes out can be tricky but, as with the pacing and timekeeping, it can actually help you to sharpen your DMing skills in the long run.

What's a little harder are those moments when entrenched views that still blight our hobby now and then come scuttling out into the open in the form of sexist behaviour, homophobic jokes and the like. These uncomfortable little blips are honestly only that – small spikes of nastiness in a broad field of fun and friendliness – but they can understandably be hard to deal with, especially if you're a naturally conflict-averse kind of person.

I wish there was some simple and straightforward way to deal with people being jerks, but if there was then the world would be a much more pleasant place. The best advice that I have is to ensure that the venue where you play and run games has an anti-harassment policy in place, if only to cut down on the arguing when you toss someone out.

THE PUBLIC GOOD

While those last two paragraphs might have left a sour taste, it's worth remembering that they form only a tiny part of the experience. For the most part, I've loved playing and running games at conventions and stores.

For many people it's the best way to get in a regular game, while for others it's an excuse to get out and hang round with like-minded folks for a couple hours a week or to practise your GMing skills on the unsuspecting public.

If nothing else, there really is no feeling like having a group of strangers come together and put together a plan worthy of the A-Team, even if it does mean having to figure out how many sheep a typical farmer might be willing to part with...



A JOURNEY THROUGH FORBIDDEN LANDS

After boldly reimagining '80s sci-fi, the creators of Tales from the Loop are bringing the decade's classic fantasy into a new century. Will their retro RPG be timeless – or out-of-touch?

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

The tabletop RPG industry seems to follow a few key rules. One of the biggest is that for every action there is an opposite reaction; for every trend there will be a counter-trend. It seems that every time someone puts out a rules-light investigation game with minimal combat, another company publishes an old-school hack-and-slasher that's all about kicking in doors and looting goblin lairs.

This kind of thing is expected by now. What isn't expected is for the same company to be on both sides of the split. Yet, that's exactly what Sweden's Free League is pushing for with its latest title, *Forbidden Lands*.

If the grandiose name didn't make it clear, *Forbidden Lands* definitely falls into the second category with a major focus on exploration and combat. This stands in contrast to the developer's previous game, the award-winning *Tales from the Loop*, which had its feet firmly planted within the realms of rules-light, narrative-driven investigation.

So how did the same minds spawn both games?

SANDBOX SENSIBILITIES

In part, it's because the team didn't start off with the express idea of committing to the old-school feel of things.

"We've always wanted to do our take on the big fantasy title," explains Free League developer Tomas Härenstam. "In many ways it's the origin of the whole RPG industry, and most of us started out adventuring with orcs and elves and dwarves and the like.

"However, it took us quite some time to nail down what that actually meant to us and what we wanted to do. Eventually we realised that the kind of fantasy that we wanted to do was free exploration – a game where you weren't railroaded into going in a particular direction.

"Old-school RPGs from the 1970s and '80s often had this open approach to adventuring. You were free to roam a map and discover its secrets and treasures. We wanted to capture that sense that you could do anything and go anywhere and, at the same time, and we wanted to combine that with something modern."

As Free League continued to work on the project, these factors all began to point towards a game with an '80s retro style, with a sandbox style and feel as its main focus. This posed a question: why develop a new game at all? Why not just grab an old copy of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* off the shelf and get rolling?

> "We wanted to capture that sense that you could do anything and go anywhere."

Well, for one thing, those old books aren't exactly user-friendly for gamers who only moved into the hobby in the last few years. Even if we ditch the jokes about grappling rules it's hard to call the rules straightforward. More than that, however, Härenstam says, while *Forbidden Lands* certainly has an old-school feel, it's far from a simple clone or even an updated version of those classic games.

"We can't just make an RPG in the way they did 30 years ago," he admits. "For one thing, we have our own way of doing things and we've always wanted to be a bit different. At the same time, even though we were reaching for that nostalgia, we think that every new game needs to do something new; it needs to advance the way things work."

CRAWLING & COMBAT

Whereas many modern fantasy titles cast the party as brave heroes in a magical realm filled with clear distinctions between good and evil, light and dark, *Forbidden Lands* takes a slightly darker and dingier approach.

"The harsher type of fantasy tends to be the one that appeals to me," says Härenstam. "There are dragons and elves and things, but they're a bit more real than they're portrayed in *World of Warcraft,* for example. They're a bit darker."

The core game is set in a remote valley that has long been isolated from the civilised world by an iron wall. Though it was once the domain of a mighty sorcerer with the wonderfully retro name of Zygofer, it is now a lawless land filled with monsters and demons of all kind; one where the common folk barricade themselves in their small villages and scratch out desperate lives among the ruins of ancient nations.

Rather than being noble and destined heroes, most players will end up as adventur-





ers and rogues more interested in profit than ideals. This helps to keep exploration at the forefront of their minds, as they seek out lost tombs and monstrous lairs to plunder and pillage.

This focus led to one of the main mechanics of the game becoming hex crawling. While the idea of a hex crawl – in which the game world is divided up into a grid of hexagons and the campaign is driven by exploring and travelling from one to another – is far from a new one, Härenstam believes the *Forbidden Lands* team has managed to put a fresh spin on it.

"The way we use the map is – as far as I know – completely new," he says. "As the GM you have a number of components that you can place in the hexes, and even in the existing world included in the book those aren't set; they're parts that they can build their game with.

"For example, we have adventure sites that the players can explore that can be placed anywhere on the map. They fall into a few categories and on the map there are symbols for each. That means it's not a completely blank slate and the players will know that there is, say, a castle here and a dungeon there, but the map won't say that a village is this one in particular.

"So when the players actually decide to head to a site, the GM can then look through the village adventure sites they have available and decide that they like the look of the village of Grindbone, so place that on the location. The village also comes with a 'legend' – a handout filled with rumours, stories and lore that foreshadow the plot and the adventure that might happen there before they actually arrive."

The system is designed to give the players space to properly explore the world and experience that all-important sense of freedom, but still provide the GM access to well-written, well-prepared and well-illustrated materials that they can use without having to spend weeks or months fleshing out every nook and cranny of the map.

"You won't have to make everything up as you go along and you'll have plenty of information to use – it's all modular so you can slot in together as you want," assures Härenstam.

"Behind it all there's also a larger narrative built in, and as players move though the various parts they'll be able to put things together."

FEELING OLD, ACTING NEW

There's more to exploring the world than just moving from one site to the next, of course. The mechanics of *Forbidden Lands* are designed around keeping not only that old-school feel in place, but also bringing the idea of exploration to the forefront.

"We have a few principles that we want to develop in all our games, and that are present in both *Forbidden Lands* and *Tales from the Loop*," explains Härenstam. "Those are to give freedom to the players and avoid weighing games down with too much setting that you need to understand before you play, as well as having the systems themselves be fairly rules-light.

"More than that, however, we believe that the rules that are there should support the main goals of the system."

The core system is based on the ruleset that Free League has used in many games, such as *Mutant: Year Zero,* with the fairly simple foundation of rolling a handful of six-sided dice based on your character's raw stats and skills. In practice this has usually worked out as an effective system that most players can wrap their heads around in a few minutes, though there are several other mechanics designed to work with *Forbidden Lands'* main aims.

One example of this is that the Free League team wanted there to be a focus on survival. This backs up the feel of the setting, which Härenstam says is fairly low-fantasy: "You aren't ever going to be flying round on the backs of dragons with buckets of gold.

"This means that simply staying alive is one of your biggest goals, so we've made sure to develop rules that support that. Not only is combat highly dangerous, but characters will find their abilities degrading if they don't make camp regularly and manage to find food in the wilderness.

"For example, there's a 'push' mechanic where you can reroll dice in return for wearing down your own attributes. Recovering them requires you to spend resources, making it important for you to manage the way you adventure.

"As a balance to this there are some abilities such as magic and other talents that you can only access if you have enough willpower, and the best way to increase your willpower is to push yourself to your limits.

GMs can place tokens in hexes of the map to symbolise various locations and discoveries





This means that if you want to use those skills, you need to push yourself every now and again."

TALES FROM THE DARKNESS

Despite a few core mechanics shared between the two, it's still fascinating to see a game as relentlessly old-school as *Forbidden Lands* coming from the same studio as *Tales from the Loop*.

However, it does seem to make much more sense when you dig into Free League's history. While the studio has only gained prominence in English-speaking countries relatively recently, it has a long and storied history in Sweden – one of the most RPG-focused nations in the world.

"We've worked on a number of different games over the years and these two are probably the two that are furthest from one another in terms of design and feel," Härenstam explains.

"*Tales from the Loop* is about solving mysteries with little combat and, more than that, there's a very scenario-driven feel to it – it's great for self-contained mysteries and, while you can certainly run a campaign in the system, it also shines in one-shot or games run over a couple of evenings.

"*Forbidden Lands* is kind of the opposite. Combat is a much more important focus; it's probably the game with the most in-depth combat system we've worked on and, while you certainly can have a game that you run in a single evening, with the party clearing out an adventure site, all the party really come together with longer-term, free-roaming exploration. You don't need to run for months and months, but it excels in campaign play."

The game is already off to a great start thanks to a wildly successful Kickstarter campaign. While it'll be hard for any game to reach the mainstream success of Free League's previous title, Härenstam admits that he is optimistic about *Forbidden Lands*' ability to cross over with both old-school RPG fans and the wave of new players who may have never even kicked in a dungeon door before.

"It'll be interesting to see how modern audiences react to old-school, hex-crawling gameplay. We've had the alpha out for a while and we know that people are engaging with it well, so hopefully that's a good sign.

"I expect that a lot of players are going to get their first characters killed fairly quickly, though," he adds. "I'm okay with that."

DRAW FROM THE PAST

Forbidden Lands has a definite old-school feel about it, and that doesn't just apply to the rules. The art is beautifully retro, too – aside from the cover artwork from returning Tales from the Loop artist Simon Stålenhag, it's almost entirely in black and white. Developer Tomas Härenstam says there's a good reason for that:

"RPGs became a huge thing in Sweden in the 1980s, and at the time THE guy – the one everyone knew about and admired – in RPG illustration was Nils Gulliksson.

"His art defined the way that fantasy worked and how it looked here. This was before you could watch fantasy shows on Netflix or YouTube, so his work defined fantasy art for teenagers: for people like us.

"A few years ago, we got the chance to put together a book collecting his work. We rescanned the old drawings, printed it on high-quality paper and, while we were putting the whole project together, we were also thinking about the fantasy RPG that would eventually become *Forbidden Lands*.

"It was a natural fit with the ideas we were working through. We thought, 'Hey, let's do a game that looks like this.' As a result, the finished books will contain quite a few classic art pieces, alongside new art based around that style."



FORBIDDEN LANDS

Old-school roleplaying for a modern world

Designer: Härenstam, Granström, Granath, Karlén, Kostulas | **Artist:** Gulliksson, Stålenhag, Brandt

208 | 11+ | £38



The dark dungeons and fog-grey morality of *Forbidden Lands* offer a delightfully old-school take on the traditional fantasy RPG, creating a sense of freedom that rewards GMs for a hands-off approach and allows the players to truly forge their own destiny.

The game comes to us from Free League, the Swedish studio probably best known for 2017's *Tales from the Loop*. Though the tone of *Forbidden Lands* is about as far as you can get from the doe-eyed wonder of that RPG, it shares the same retro approach and charming take on childhood memories – in this case the awe and excitement so many of us felt when we first encountered fantasy gaming.

Almost every aspect of the game, from the beautiful black-and-white design to the enormous map found in the starter set, sparks happy memories of leafing through old *D&D* books or daydreaming epic adventures sparked by *Lord of the Rings*. The titular Forbidden Lands are stuffed with all the magic swords, abandoned castles and horrible monsters you could wish for, and the rules are designed around allowing the players to explore and quest to their hearts' content.

While it's certainly aiming for an old-school feel, the mechanics that propel the game along are thoroughly modern and supported by a few rather fascinating innovations. The core ruleset has stats and skills that feed into a dice pool that will feel very familiar to anyone who has played other Free League games; even newcomers should be able to get a handle on things within a few minutes.

Perhaps the biggest quirk to the system is the complete absence of hit points or any other kind of health score. Instead, any damage you take cuts into your stats, so physical damage reduces your strength while emotional trauma slashes away at your empathy. As you rely on these stats to defend yourself from damage in the first place, a battle can very quickly push you right to the edge.

This may not be such a huge problem, however, as forcing your character to the limit of their abilities is the only way to gain 'willpower' – the resource used to perform special abilities and cast spells. The most practical way to generate willpower is to re-roll a failed check, which comes at the risk of taking damage while boosting reserves of inner strength.

It's a strange system that seems ripe for abuse, but once you get it onto the table it works surprisingly smoothly. The fact that magic is a product of desperation and defiance in the face of death fits well into the world, which is another way that *Forbidden Lands* sets itself apart from the crowd.

The setting, and indeed the overall tone, manages to be both unrelentingly bleak and strangely liberating. The entire game is set in a kingdom that was effectively walled off from the rest of the world and left to die at the claws of a demonic mist that killed anybody foolish enough to leave their homes after dark. Anything resembling a shining bastion of civilisation has long since rotted away and countless ancient manors and treasuries lie empty save for the dead and the desperate.

The game kicks off a few years after the blood mist mysteriously disappeared, leaving the land free to explore for the first time in centuries. How the players shape this dangerous land is entirely up to them.

While the lore is incredibly compelling, it does have a few weak points that might leave readers scratching their heads, most of which revolve around the surprisingly limited impact the blood mist seems to have had.

Many of the backgrounds suggested in the players' guide involve travelling extensively as a child, which in theory would have been near impossible, and the towns and villages seem plucked straight from a conventional dark fantasy world rather than one where settlements were forced to survive in near-isolation for hundreds of years. These may seem petty concerns, but the blood mist is such a fascinating idea that it's frustrating when it fails to gel with the details.

This doesn't change the fact that *Forbidden Land* is a beautiful game that offers a chance for players to experience something that captures the feel of old-school adventuring but still feels fresh. It's well worth a look for anyone looking for something different to their fantasy gaming.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

It's like someone took hazy childhood memories of a classic *D&D* game and mixed them with a dash of bleak Scandinavian darkness.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: FOURTH EDITION

Forbidden Lands is almost as dark and violent as the world of *Warhammer*, but offers a different take on freedom and exploration.

FORBIDDEN LANDS: RAVEN'S PURGE

Designer: Granström, Härenstam | **Artist:** Gulliksson, Brandt, Tapia

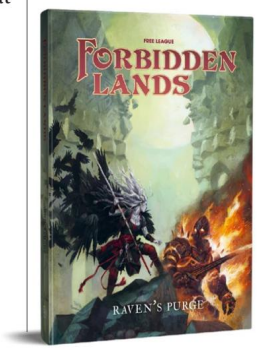
224 | 17+ | £28

From the first trip in a filth-encrusted slavers' camp to the pivotal showdown with a genuinely disturbing demonic sorcerer, *Raven's Purge* manages to perfectly capture the blend of epic fantasy and dark horror that defines *Forbidden Lands*. Just be warned that nothing comes easy in the wastelands, and both players and GM will need to put in some solid effort if they plan to come out the other end intact.

A lot of this comes from that fact that – in line with the RPG's love of freedom and exploration – *Raven's Purge* shies away from a traditional linear campaign structure and instead acts more like a toolbox stuffed with locations and characters. It sets out a rough plot involving magical elven rubies, a legendary crown and a battle to decide the fate of the Forbidden Lands, but it's expected that the quests will come together in bits and pieces as the adventurers forge their own path.

The meat of the campaign comes in eight large adventure sites that range from an old quarry that's been taken over by a band of party-loving ogres through to an ancient mine that houses a powerful demon with the mind of a child. Rather than having any pre-determined events play out or obvious quest hooks to leap on, each site simply comes loaded with suggestions of what could happen and a solid list of characters to play around with.

While this can make running the sites a little overwhelming, it also allows for absolutely anything to happen – there's no chance of the party derailing your plans when there weren't any rails to begin with, after all. A quest to an orcish fortress might end with a dawn raid alongside an elvish strike force, or the party could end up with an emperor as a friend and an army at their back.



Sometimes it can be hard to pick out important details about a site, and a more concise sketch of the campaign's introduction would be nice, but the writing is generally solid and the presentation is truly second-to-none. Just beware that *Forbidden Lands* is definitely a game aimed at older players, and that some of the content can get a little nastier than standard fantasy villainy.

The free-roaming soul of *Forbidden Lands* can make it an acquired taste, but if you've had a crack at the boxset and want to expand your adventures in the darkness *Raven's Purge* should be an easy purchase.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

PALEOMYTHIC

Author: Graham Rose | **Artists:** John McCambridge, Mars Oosterveld

287 | 12+ | £25

The RPG scene is rife with games set in or inspired by Ancient Greece and Egypt, viking legends and feudal Japan but very few set out to capture the world before them. Prehistory, the world we can only guess at. Which is a damn shame because the Paleolithic age is fascinating. It's when we developed stone tools and showed those mammoths that having all that tasty meat and warm fur was a bad idea. It's also the largest period of time in human history as it is literally everything before the Mesolithic which means you can go wild with it. Which is just what *Paleomythic* does.

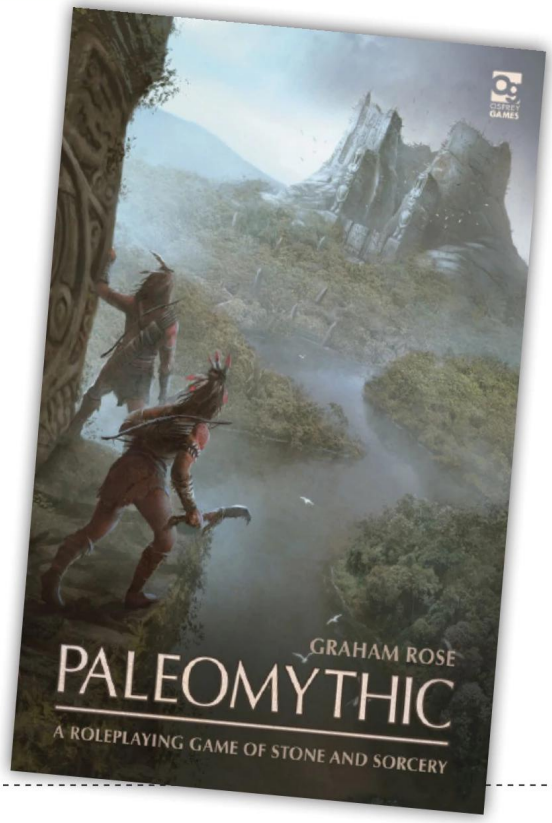
Describing itself as 'stone and sorcery,' players are able to take on one of tonnes of classes with unique powers like being able to control snakes or eating people for their skills) as they set out into the land of Mu. With the ancient setting comes more of an emphasis on survival than say *Odyssey of the Dragonlords* and players will have to be careful not to fall victim to debilitating wounds or starvation.

Published by Osprey Games, *Paleomythic* has a very crunchy feel to it as every few pages are taken up by tables about everything from what you randomly steal when pickpocketing to what traits background NPCs have. Which, is actually very important as the number of traits a character has defines how many dice they roll when attempting something. And the way weapons and tools can break or activate special effects based on your roll really adds to the feel of stone age imperfection.

The setting itself feels reminiscent of old *Tarzan* and *Journey To The Centre Of The Earth* type stories just without the British explorers and evil Nazi wizards. Which is a surprising breath of fresh air.

ANNA BLACKWELL

PLAY IT? PROBABLY



THE OLD SCHOOL REVIVAL

GAMING LIKE IT'S 1974

While many of us embrace the newest systems in roleplaying games, there are a number of players looking for the classic, free-flowing roleplaying of the past. That's where the Old School Revival comes in

Words by **Matt Bassil**

Unlike war, *Dungeons & Dragons* is always changing. Every so often, the rules receive a dramatic shake up, partly to prevent stagnation and partly to encourage fans to buy new books.

Each edition has brought something new to the table, *Dungeons & Dragons: Second Edition* piloted the beginnings of a skill system; *Third Edition* gave players new ways to customise their characters, and *Fourth Edition* made sweeping (and rather controversial) changes to combat. The most recent version, *Fifth Edition*, has brought *D&D* more success than ever before, a simplified ruleset making it easier for newbies to hop on board, while the hobby's overall profile has been raised by Youtube, Twitch, and *Stranger Things*.

But a handful of fans have refused to move with the times. Through the early 2000s, as their favourite game morphed into something they no longer recognised, RPG designers like Stuart Marshall and Chris Gonnerman kept the old ways alive. Stuart explains his group simply never made the switch from First Edition. "We had zero inclination to re-purchase all the rulebooks and learn a new ruleset. For us it wasn't broken."

At the time, this was a bit like championing the N64 while everyone else unwrapped their shiny, new Nintendo Switches. No new material was being published, and it was increasingly hard to find official copies of the old players' handbooks and dungeon masters' guides which, long out of print, were fast becoming collector's items.



ABOVE *Hall of Doom* art by Steve Zieser

OPPOSITE *Basic Fantasy RPG* cover art by Erik Wilson

NOSTALGIA RUSH

But activity online showed that there was plenty of interest in older playstyles. "I knew from my time on Dragonsfoot forums that there were quite a lot of GMs and players out there looking for ways to keep playing old school. It's a niche market, but it's a lively niche," Gonnerman says.

Still, old school play might have gradually declined had Wizards of the Coast not published the Open Gaming Licence in 2000. Initially designed to allow third-party publishers to produce adventures compatible with the newly released *Third Edition*, the OGL allowed a hefty chunk of rules and creative material from *D&D* to be freely used. Eventually, old school gamers realised that this might allow the old editions they held so dear to be legally emulated. Thus the retroclone was born.

Matt Finch, Stuart Marshall and Chris Gonnerman were the first on the scene, Matt and Stuart publishing the *Old School Reference and Index Compilation (OSRIC)* and Chris unveiling *Basic Fantasy RPG*, both in 2006. The former was a remarkably faithful remake of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, whereas the latter more loosely resembled *Basic/Expert D&D*, with several quality of life adjustments thrown in.

Once the retroclone concept was established (with no legal challenge from Wizards of the Coast arising) a steady stream of similar RPGs would follow: *Swords and Wizardry, Labyrinth Lord, Dark Dungeons*, each one a recreation of its creator's personal favourite system. Though these titles lacked the *D&D* name and had nary a beholder or illithid in sight, each sought to preserve the spirit of the game's earliest years.

OLD SCHOOL MINDSET

But what is that spirit? It's difficult to sum up, though many have tried. 'Rulings not rules', the first axiom in Finch's *A Quick Primer for Old School Gaming*, is a good place to start. It highlights the rules-light approach most old school games adopt, at least when compared to more recent RPGs.

As Finch puts it, "many of the things that are 'die roll' challenges in modern gaming – disarming a trap, for example – are handled by observation, thinking, and experimentation in old-style games." The intention is for players to spend less time scouring their character sheets for the right skill-check to use and instead think about a situation the way they might in real life. The emphasis is on player skill.

The pared-down rules are designed to get the most out of the GM's abilities as well. Gonnerman says, "modern games are designed to limit the GM's ability to run a bad game, but I also believe





ABOVE A friendly spider from Daniel J. Bishop's adventure modules

BELOW A dentured slug, prepared to end the life of a level zero character

they limit the GM's ability to run a really good game. They have rules for everything, because they do not trust the GM to make good rulings." Rather than trying to account for every eventuality within the rules, old school games allows the GM to make common sense decisions on the fly.

Old school play often contains elements of improvisation. GMs are encouraged to use random tables to generate encounters, letting the dice fall as they may to produce unexpected and interesting results. Railroading and linear, complex plots with preordained character arcs are a big no-no, and many GMs aim for a completely open-world, or sandbox game.

Writing adventure modules for a community with a negative view of fixed stories is obviously a bit of a challenge. Daniel J. Bishop, author of adventures such as *Through the Dragonwall* and *Danger in the Deep!*, explains his process. "I try to give the players plenty of options. While there might be a strong expected direction of play, I try to ensure that the players have opportunities to wrest that away from the adventure. If you can run the same adventure six times, and each of those times it plays differently, I think you've got something worthwhile."

Bishop describes the distinction between old and new playstyles as the difference between "characters in a fantasy world" and "characters in a fantasy story". In old school games the adventures are the focus, the adventurers less so.

This is fortunate, since most old school adventurers meet an untimely end. Gonnerman's advice for newcomers to the genre comes straight from the infamous RPG *Dark Souls*: "Prepare to die." Much like that brutal videogame, much of the appeal of old school play lies in the challenge. First level PCs with just a few meagre HP to their name will regularly encounter monsters that could swat them like flies. Players must be resourceful and know when to run.

"If you know your character probably won't die, you play differently. Stupidly, to be honest," Gonnerman reasons. "When you know your choices are play smart or die, you try much harder to play smart, and when you win, you've actually done something."

OLD BUT NEW

Over the years, old school gaming has developed into an artistic movement of sorts, with a new name: the OSR, and hundreds of new fans. As this movement has grown larger its scope has widened; what it means to be an old school gamer has become more nebulous. Ask two members of the community to define the OSR and you'll get two very different answers. They might even disagree on whether the R stands for 'Renaissance' or 'Revival.'

Part of this expansion includes new games and forays into new genres. *Stars without Number* caters to sci-fi lovers, for example, while



Lamentations of the Flame Princess, perhaps the most commercially successful OSR game, is best described as 'new weird' (think China Miéville or Jeff Vandermeer). These newer OSR systems tend to be only loosely based on their forefathers, if they're borrowing from them at all. *Maze Rats*, for example, shares the OSR philosophy, but its ruleset is completely original.

Bishop writes modules for one of these newer systems, *Dungeon Crawl Classics*, created by Goodman Games in 2012. One of the game's selling points is that "players can't predict what they will be up against, and the judge can't predict how things will play out at the table." In this way, Daniel says, DCC feels different to most fantasy RPGs. "*Dungeons & Dragons* has had an unintended effect on fantasy, where it has codified everything. DCC really moves against that tide," he explains.

One of the ways DCC sets itself apart is its unique method for handling the deadliness of OSR games, especially at low levels. A campaign begins with something called a funnel. Each player controls several, super weak, 0-level characters and the lucky few that make it through their first dungeon and come out alive go on to form the first level party. This way, GMs can have no qualms about throwing very high stakes at the players right from the get-go. Daniel describes it as "the game where you fight unknown monsters, speak with alien gods, and find ancient magicks… and then you reach level 1."

Varied though it is, the published work of the OSR is really just the tip of the iceberg. Right from its earliest days, online communities, places like Dragonsfoot, have been a driving force for the old school style. The late Google Plus, Discord and countless blogs have always been at the forefront of the OSR, and much of the movement's most creative work can be found online for free.

Though they share an interest in the old school, these bloggers have a distinctly modern attitude when it comes to their work. The OSR has a collaborative spirit that is most comparable to the videogame modding scene: members freely share settings, systems, classes and house rules for others to borrow, remake and remix with their own ideas.

Whether it's because the OSR started out with remakes of *D&D* or because simplified rulesets naturally lead to easily adaptable content, this approach lends the OSR movement an energy and an enthusiasm that continues to draw new people into its fold.

"Ten years or so ago, I was amazed all the time by it," Marshall says. "Nowadays nothing surprises me."

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SETTING BOUNDARIES

Endless imagination often means that little is off-limits in the worlds of roleplaying games. Still, there are certain subjects that require careful handling if you want your group to enjoy every moment at the table

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

One of the most impressive things about tabletop RPGs is the ease with which players become utterly invested in characters conjured up from raw imagination and half-remembered fantasy novels.

Usually this is a blessing – getting a friend or family member to shed a tear over a fallen ally is often the proudest moment of a GM's career – but, if handled poorly, it can amplify the consequences of bad decisions and moments of poor taste. Watching a film or reading a book with upsetting content and themes can be horrible, but at least you aren't having to actively participate in it.

This is something that our group had to navigate carefully when the player behind the party's sorceress idly wondered if there might be any long-term consequences to the week she'd spent relaxing with her boyfriend, a captain in the Queen's Guard who'd been elevated from nameless NPC cannon-fodder to stalwart ally after a series of spectacular combat rolls. It was late in the night and we were in a cheerful sort of mood, so, without really thinking of the implications for the campaign, I had them roll for it.

Whatever mysterious force that guide dice rolls seems to have a strange sense of humour about these things, so naturally the tiny chunk of plastic bounced off a wine glass and came down as a 20.

And just like that, Criella the Sorceress was pregnant.





Tales from the Loop protects its young characters from serious harm and death

Once the wave of immature giggling had died down, we realised that we'd accidentally introduced a new story thread to the game – one that had the potential to be deeply upsetting if we handled it clumsily.

Characters dying off or being badly injured in combat was an important part of the game, but none of us were comfortable with those stakes extending to an unborn child.

So, as a group, we agreed that we'd find a reason for Criella to split off from the rest of the group for a while – not because she was any less effective at her role, but because plot armour doesn't mesh very well with the rules of the game – and work out what her player wanted to do a few months down the line.

Most importantly, we agreed that any medical drama or danger surrounding the pregnancy was off-limits. There weren't going to be any edgy twists or sudden shock revelations that pressed back on the borders of what was acceptable.

We were here to have fun, after all.

TOO DARK FOR A DARK WORLD

In some ways, the decision to force the world to bend to the will of the group in order to avoid something we would find upsetting can seem a little out of place, or even hypocritical.

After all, when you take a step back and think about it, most of the RPGs we play are stuffed to the gills with all kind of horrors and darkness; it's rare that most adventurers manage to wander between dungeons without being obliged to hack a wandering ogre into bloody lumps, while evil cults sacrificing innocents seem to be lurking in every other basement.

So why are some kinds of depravity staples of the hobby while others are kept under lock and key? Why do we clap and cheer when the bounty hunter rolls a critical hit and blasts the imperial commander's head clean off, but shy away from more mundane horrors?

Perhaps the biggest factor is that, for the most part, we as players remain safely insulated by the more conventional kinds of nastiness going down in the game world.

While RPG combat can be bloody, it's usually the same kind of fantastical fare we munch popcorn to in the cinema: an exciting clash of foes that has – for the vast majority of us – as much relation to our day-to-day lives as the magic spells our wizards cast. As horrible as the chaos-worshipping nutters we confront may be, they aren't exactly the kind of thing we need to worry about in real life. Hopefully. This means that their evil excites and unsettles us, but doesn't upset us.

Other kinds of horror... well, they strike a little closer to home.

TRIGGER WARNING

From sexual violence to stereotyped portrayals of mental illness, there's a lengthy list of topics that can make the folks gathered around the table feel uncomfortable and unwelcome. Some of these might be obvious while others may not be so readily apparent but, unless there's a very, very good reason for including them, most of the time these are probably best left on the cutting room floor.

Of course, what is and isn't appropriate can't always be set in stone and can vary with both the group and the system they're playing. Games like *Tails of Equestria* probably have an even longer list of things to avoid than most conventional games. Heck, if you're running the wonderful *Tales from the Loop* according to the rules, the children you play as aren't even able to be seriously hurt, let alone killed.

On the other side of the coin there are intentionally dark and disturbing titles like *Vampire: The Masquerade* and *Lamentations of the Flame Princess*, where genuine, unapologetic evil is a core part of the experience.

Even then, of course, there is a difference between pushing the boundaries of what's acceptable and driving players away from the table, especially if people aren't made completely aware of the kind of games they are before sitting down to play.

HAPPY & SAFE

No doubt, there are plenty of people out there who don't really agree with me. For some folks, placing limits on what kind of subject matter can come up at the table is babying your players at best – and edging close to censorship at worst.

Likewise, I'm sure that there are plenty of stories out there about the time an arc packed with overt racism turned into a great real-world discussion, or where a question of whether the heroes should slay the children of their monstrous foes led to incredible character development.

If you only take away one thing from this piece, however, let it be that introducing controversial topics to a game isn't something to be done casually or on a whim.

There's room for having characters make tough decisions, and for placing them in difficult situations where there isn't a clear division between right and wrong, but not for making the players themselves feel so uncomfortable that the game becomes something to endure rather than enjoy. After all: if we aren't enjoying ourselves, why are we playing?



SWORDS, SEX & SCI-FI

Father-son design team Mike and Cody Pondsmith reveal the future of iconic RPG Cyberpunk and discuss swapping pixels for paper as they bring video game series The Witcher to the tabletop

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

Your publishing label, R. Talsorian, has been around for more than three decades now. Could you quickly run us through the company's history?

Mike Pondsmith: About '84 I started a company called R. Talsorian Games, mostly by mistake. I had written a game called *Mekton* which was the first giant Japanese robot game. We started a game company on $500 and it proceeded to grow. We did *Mekton*, we did three different versions of that. We moved onto *Teenagers from Outer Space* and several other games – including the one we known for mostly, which is a game called *Cyberpunk*.

Cyberpunk has been published in nine different languages now. Turned out, one of the languages it was published in was Polish. This was back during the Iron Curtain days, so I just couldn't imagine anybody being able to even read *Cyberpunk* in an Iron Curtain country. But as our friends over at CD Projekt Red [the Polish video game studio behind the *Witcher* series now developing *Cyberpunk 2077*, based on the RPG] like to say, 'We had communism and *Cyberpunk*', so I guess that's what we gave them.

From there we went on to do *Castle Falkenstein* and *Bubblegum Crisis* and a lot of anime games including *Dragonball Z, VOTOMS* – just basically tons and tons of stuff. At this point it's kind of a blur.

People don't necessarily associate you with anime roleplaying games, as much of the attention is focused on *Cyberpunk*. What do you find so appealing about the anime genre?

MP: We got into it because basically we did *Mekton* and the Japanese fans liked *Mekton* so they got in touch with us and we loved the shows. I stumbled onto everything from *Gundam* to *Shirley* in-between. So basically it was sort of a natural extension an since we were doing stuff with Japanese companies we ended up doing a lot of Japanese-based games. That's just basically the proclivity – my wife and I like anime and were big fans at the time. It just kind of meshed in.

What's interesting is that cyberpunk was actually at that point bigger in Japan than it was in the States. For example, during that same period of time we get things like *Akira* and a lot of other shows – *Bubblegum Crisis* was coming out at that point – that were basically already working on a cyberpunk ethos. So it wasn't a huge jump for us to do cyberpunk at that point. That and the fact that my favourite movie is *Blade Runner*.

The original *Cyberpunk* was later retitled to *Cyberpunk 2013*, while the second edition launched as *Cyberpunk 2020*...

MP: It's originally been *Cyberpunk*, that's what it's trademarked for. Then, in addition, it went on. The original took place in 2013 and we added the *2020* essentially as version 20.20, which most people have never actually gotten to guess the joke on. There was an interim version that I never actually published.

WHO EXACTLY IS R. TALSORIAN?

If you're wondering who the mysterious Ross Talsorian is, you might be surprised to learn he's a raisin farmer. Mike Pondsmith was advised by friends not to name his new company after himself – so he chose one of his investors instead.



So that was *Cyberpunk 20.20* or *2020*, that was because we upped the timeline a little bit so we had a little more breathing room. 2013 was getting a little close.

And now 2020 is getting a little close!

MP: I know, but I'm not moving it any further now. We're moving it up to 2077 and that's where we're staying for a while.

Cody Pondsmith: We're just going to be really safe and the next one's going to be like 9854, y'know?

Technology has moved on since *Cyberpunk* was released. In many ways, we're living in the cyberpunk era today.

MP: I have a joke around here which is 'cyberpunk now more than ever.'

One of the things we've been doing for a recent reprint is we've actually added a section called '2020 is closer than you think' where we talk about things that were just conceptual ideas way the heck back in the '80s and are now fundamental to culture and how we've actually built them.

In a large part, a lot of the things we have now are coming out of the fact that we had the cyberpunk ethos which was really strongly based around personal technology and personal use of that technology. Sitting around me right now are at least nine pieces of phone, recording, computer technologies that are all essentially extensions of things you would see in a cyberpunk movie 20 years ago. So we've made it.

The problem with speculative fiction is you're going to have people look at it and go: 'Hm, a phone that can be communicating with something in orbit that you can just flip open and talk to anybody you needed to. Beam me up, Scotty.' Someone would look at that and go: 'That's a damn good idea, let's make a phone like that.'

By contrast, the fantasy genre is almost entirely based in fiction. With Cody creating *The Witcher RPG* at one end of the scale and Mike developing *Cyberpunk* at the other, how does that difference play into your work?

CP: They are definitely two sides of the spectrum. For me, as someone who's always been big into fantasy, there is an appeal to that larger-than-life thing that – unless we go severely off our bounds with genetics and whatnot – we're never going to have. But there's some appeal to that, because it keeps some of the fantastic nature of things.

There's a lot of appeal in the world we live in where there aren't many completely unexplored regions. People feel there aren't many new things to discover. There's an appeal to a world where most of the world is undiscovered and walking a day or two away from your house takes you somewhere that people may never have gone to – or if they have gone there they may never have come back

MP: What I did realise is that when Cody first wanted to do *Witcher*, because he brought the project to us, what I was always amused at is that [protagonist] Geralt is a very, very cyberpunk-esque character in that whether he's in a fantasy or cyberpunk setting, he's essentially the lone solo who goes out and deals with the situation. He's a very film-noir character, and that makes *Witcher* appealing to me as well. When you read the novels, particularly in the short stories, he sounds almost like a fantasy version of [*The Maltese Falcon* protagonist] Sam Spade going: 'Okay, so what's the deal and what's the case and I'm going to go deal with it in my own unique way.' It's a very, very noir kind of character. I love that part.

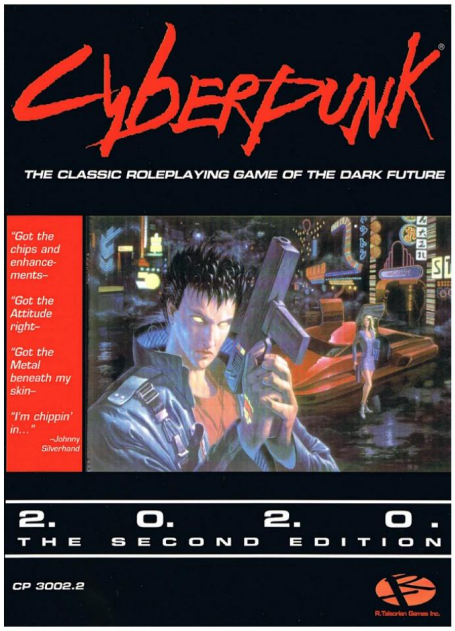
We have three teams that are all doing different things and a couple of them overlap. For example, the *Mekton* team and the *Cyberpunk* team have actually a fair amount of overlap because we're dealing with technologies.

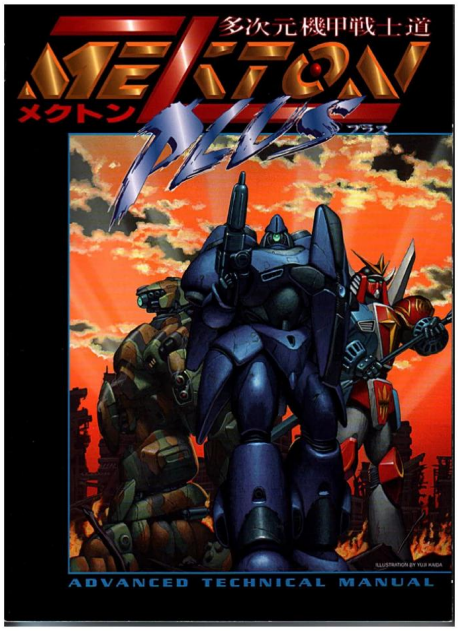
Your games are built on the Fuzion engine. How do you adjust that RPG system to suit the various genres you work with?

MP: One of the interesting things is Fuzion grew out of a need to already hit a lot of ► genres. We had applied it to giant robots, we



"Geralt from The Witcher is a very cyberpunk-esque character. He's a film-noir character."





■ ***Above: While Mekton was grounded in anime, Cyberpunk was inspired by sci-fi such as Blade Runner.***

■ ***Top: Mike Pondsmith, Cyberpunk creator, R. Talsorian founder and stylish as hell in a leather jacket.***

■ ***Main, opposite: Cyberpunk 2077, the upcoming video game by CD Projekt Red based on the RPG.***

had applied it to fantasy in some respects with *Castle Falkenstein*, which has its own sub-genre. What we were aiming for was something that was adaptable on the fly between types of roleplaying, with the core being basically that you've got natural abilities, you've got stuff you learn and there's always a bunch of dumb luck.

What's fascinating is that over the years – we hadn't really seen anything like that before when I was originally writing Interlock, Fuzion's earlier version – it's now become very de rigueur to find that combination because stat skill and dumb luck basically cover most of the aspects you need to deal with. Once you get that hammered out, it becomes how specialised we need to get it.

CP: There's an interesting problem to that with *Witcher*, because when we spoke with CDPR about doing *Witcher* one of the core understandings was that they, being *Cyberpunk* players, really wanted the game to be based on the core systems of *Cyberpunk*, so they would really have that feeling, because they felt it would be appropriate.

It's been an interesting process, because one thing that hadn't really been thought of a lot was the fact that *Cyberpunk*, being a near-future game, is very reliant on guns and ranged weapons and most of its systems reflect that. Transferring that sort of system over to *Witcher* suddenly takes it into a world that's based very, very heavily on effectively melee combat with some ranged combat. It's also a system with magic.

There's been a tremendous amount of work that's gone into tailoring a primarily gunfight-based system into a very solid melee system, including a lot of work emulating parts of *The Witcher 3*'s combat system with its strong and light attacks and its patented dodge rolls and whatnot. Also implementing a critical wound system that I'm very pleased with to give you that ugly, brutal, visceral feeling that you get in the books and in the video games; limbs lopped off and organs wounded and things like that.

MP: There's another thing that comes with that as well, that I'm seeing working with *Cyberpunk 2077*, which is that even when you have the same core tabletop system, you have to adapt to basically work into a digital system as well. So a lot of the things that Cody's had to do would have been artefacts of the digital system that are going over into tabletop – things that are assumed or invisible when you're playing a video game but become very visible and no longer transparent when you take it over to the tabletop.

CP: For example, the adrenaline system in *Witcher 3*, which I'm betting a solid 50%



"You get that ugly, brutal, visceral feeling in the Witcher RPG that you get in the books and games."

to 60% of players don't notice. When we transferred things over to the RPG, because I wanted to be about as faithful as I could, I had to sit down and solidly look at the adrenaline system and transfer it into a dice-based system that could be used in the RPG. Which definitely brings it from effectively, as Mike stated, something most people would never visually see except for maybe a few bars in a corner into something that – if you choose to use it, as it's set up as an alternate system if you want to get a more visceral combat system – you have as part of your game. Something that you refer back to every once in a while as a core part of combat.

Do you feel indebted to stick close to the format and 'feel' of the video games, given their popularity?

CP: It's interesting, because there definitely are some differences between the books and the games, including a lot of very interesting weird canon things based on who you're talking to about the canon.

We've tried to get a good balance between the games' core on the combat and stuff like that and then the feel really solidly coming from a combination of the books and the games. Because, while we feel there's a lot of good stuff to be drawn from the games and we want to draw from them as much as possible, the books are the core source material and we want to incorporate as much of them as possible.

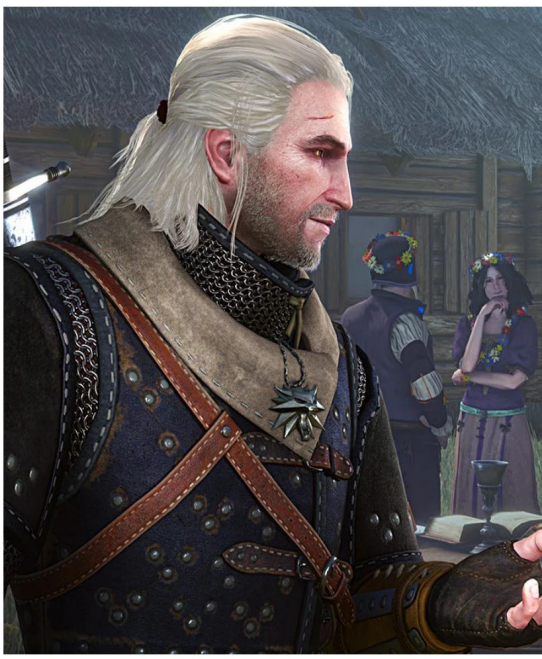
So it's a balancing act of basically us trying to stay true to the games and get the feel of the games, because we know that a lot of our fans will have played the games more than they will really know about the books. But also we know that a lot of our other fans, especially outside of the States and in Poland and Eastern Europe, will probably be also very familiar with the books, if not more familiar.

I have gone out of my way to put an entire section in the book that's basically if you've never played the video games, here's a few pages to get you caught up on what happened in the video games and go.

There are a lot of fantasy RPGs out there. How did you go about capturing that distinctly '*Witcher*' feel?

CP: A lot of what we've done is basically drawn from a combination of characters, a lot of time spent wandering around the in-game worlds of *Witcher 2* and *3*, and a lot of the short story series in the original core books, because they – more even than the long narrative – give you a very solid feeling for what the world is like. So mostly it's a lot of effectively observing what we can.

We have two experts over at CDPR who we talk to about things to make sure they're lore-accurate and whatnot. But it's mostly we're trying to get a solid world section where you can refer to for information and then we build it up with basically character classes that are based on



characters in the video games and the books so that you kind of have a concept of what you are.

MP: We've carried forward a lot of the same things we had to do in *Cyberpunk* originally, which was to show classes that tell you how to play within that world.

CP: We also have set up two very, very in-depth life paths that you run through when you create your character. Which are basically a series of roles that give you a background. So when you go into create your character, you pick out your race and profession and go through and find out, 'Okay, where do I come from? What is my homeland? Are my parents alive? If not, what happened to them? What happened in my early life?' All of those are heavily geared towards the feeling of the *Witcher* world that we've gotten via the books and video games. So, in theory, if you run through your life path, you will come out with a character that is a very *Witcher* character.

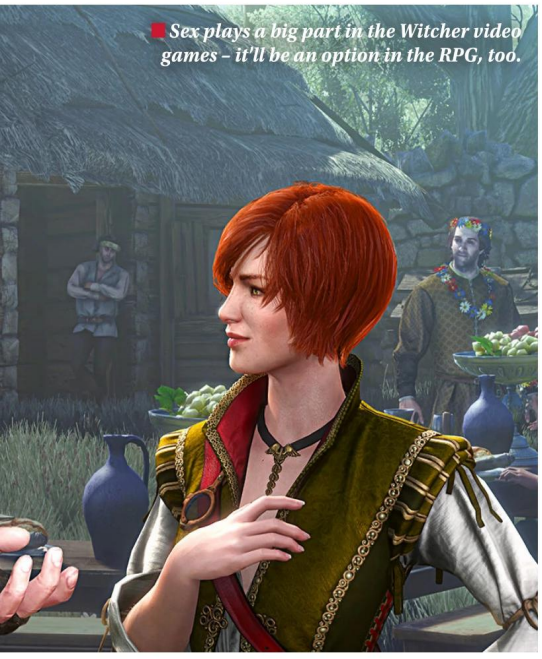
Cyberpunk and _The Witcher_ are both titles rooted in genre, but they exude a certain 'badass' attitude. How are the games designed to encourage players to embody this style?

MP: Partially you have to find out a little bit about what works inside the head of the player. One of the things that works very well for both *Cyberpunk* and *Witcher* is that we do have examples now that people can look at and say, 'It's like this.' Your big trick is to make sure that it's rewarding to try; that it actually has positive feedback to try to do things that are cool and are basically showstopper moments.

CP: I always try to suggest that you basically start your players off with something that is 100% in that genre. When I run *Witcher* games I always try to give the players a bit of background. I try to start them out with a feeling of what their last couple weeks have been like so that they know what they're coming from. That will usually inform how they move forward.

MP: That's sort of the same thing I do with the *Cyberpunk* games. I particularly love the setup situations that evolve around people's living situations. I like to point out the fact that you've moved to a really ratty cube somewhere or a terrible apartment which is better than the fact you were sleeping under a bridge that night, and that right now everything you have is in a bivvy bag and there's at least two booster gangs who'd just love to take that, kill you and sell you for body parts. The big point is to pick this up at a point of contact where the player knows how wet, cold or endangered and miserable they might be, and then to basically give them something that's a very, very strong immersion problem right after that.

CP: In the case of immersion, I've found that, for home GMs, if you can pull out a laptop or your phone or something and pull up those ten-hour ambient loops for rain or city noises or anything like that, it really helps your players keep focused and in the world.



Sex plays a big part in the Witcher video games – it'll be an option in the RPG, too.

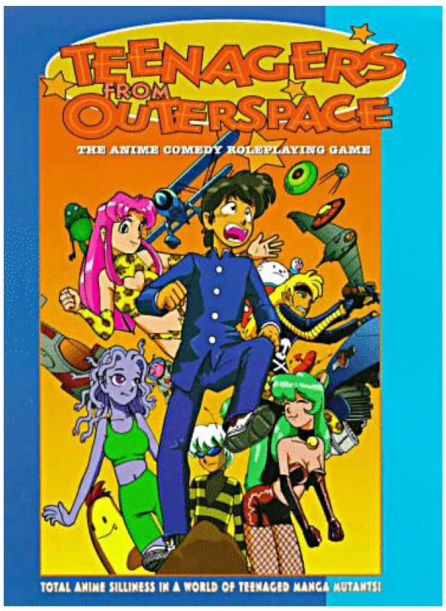
Sex plays a big role in _The Witcher_. Have you included it in the roleplaying game?

CP: Sex is always an awkward one for RPGs. There is a section in the game master's section which basically goes over that. You can do it. That is perfectly fine. Assumedly, probably most of your players are adults, they are used to the concept. But unless everybody in your game is cool with it, you don't run it, because that is probably the second-worst way to make your game awkward as hell.

We have joked about doing an entire Whoreson [Junior, a crime boss in *Witcher 3*] supplement which would have brothel creation tables and stuff like that, but that's probably going to be an April Fools' Day product somewhere down the line.

MP: We've had the same issue with *Cyberpunk*. In fact, oddly enough, the furthest we ever went with it in *Cyberpunk* was [sequel] *CyberGeneration*, where we looked at it more from the standpoint of, well, sex is a lot stickier and more of a problem when you're 16, y'know? In that one it was essentially more to show it was a messy situation.

CP: We do have seduction as a skill, we do have experts, so I suppose you could choose 'expert prostitute'. We do have a social combat system which has both romance and seduction, so I guess if you really wanted to you could sit down and run it. I still wouldn't suggest it, but there you go. ■



Teenagers from Outer Space, the second RPG published by R. Talsorian following Mekton.

CYBER SPEAK

The world of Cyberpunk has its own unique language and dialect, which might seem unfamiliar to first-time players. We break down some of the terms you should know.

Booster
A member of a street gang (known as booster gangs). Typical traits include a penchant for ultra-violence, cyber enhancements and intense control of their territory. Boosters can be part of sub-categories, such as the identical look of poser gang members or chromatic metal gangs, who listen to rock music and take instructions from the lyrics.

Bodysculpt
Drastically changing your appearance using cosmetic surgery and cybernetics. A person bodysculpted with non-human or alien elements, such as fur or fangs, is known as an 'exotic'. Can be referred to as biosculpting.

Chombatta
Slang term for a friend or family member. Can be substituted with 'choomba'.

Braindance
A digital recording of an individual's personal experience, which can then be streamed directly into a viewer's neural system using a brain augmentation called a BD player, allowing them to re-experience all the sights, sounds, smells and feelings of the event.

Crystaljock
Computer users and hackers considered 'old-school' due to their use of viruses and apps over virtual reality. One of the character roles (classes) available in *Cyberpunk*.



CYBERPUNK RED JUMPSTART KIT

Old-school future visions

Designer: Pondsmith, Ackerman, Gray, Hutt, Pondsmith | **Artist:** Various

98+ | 13+ | £29

If a good starter set is meant to act as a little torpedo loaded with everything great about a game, the *Cyberpunk Red Jumpstart Kit* is a solid hit. There are a few spots where rather archaic design clashes with slick modern presentation, but within the space of two booklets and some handouts this box jacks players right in to the neon-pulsing heart of cyberpunk.

Set in an alternate-timeline version of the 2040s, *Cyberpunk Red* is the latest version of a game with a pedigree stretching back more than three decades – a time when you could get away with calling a cyberpunk game *Cyberpunk*. The full RPG is slated for release sometime in the next year or so, but until then the *Jumpstart Kit* is designed to give players and GMs alike a taste of the game and the world it inhabits.

If you want to picture that world, just conjure up every single trope and cliché you could possibly associate with the word 'cyberpunk' and then give it a slight brushing with '80s flair. While that sounds like an insult, it really isn't meant to be. Rather, the sheer, shameless dedication to embracing everything cyberpunk-ey smashes any inhibitions keeping you from leaning into the roleplay.

On top of this, it also means that you really don't need to already be invested in the setting in order to hit the ground running. Even if you only have a passing association with the genre you already have a grasp on shady megacorps, futuristic street gangs and visor-clad cyberhackers. This is especially helpful in a starter set where slashing the time from opening the box to rolling dice should be as low as possible.

It helps that the rules are – initially, anyway – simple to work with. Overcoming challenges, whether they involve scaling a wall or impressing a contact with a sweet guitar solo, requires a d10 roll modified by some combination of raw attributes and trained skills. Roll high enough and you pull it off. Easy.

As you delve deeper into the game, however, the complexity swiftly grows. Hand-to-hand combat is surprisingly chunky, with options to grapple, choke and throw your enemies about the room, while ranged battles involve consulting a chart showing how hard it is for different classes of weapons to nail a target at certain ranges.

It's rare that this crosses the line into confusion, but every now and then the simulationist approach of earlier *Cyberpunk* editions peeks through and adds an extra layer of bookkeeping and detail to things. As you take damage, for example, you need to track how much of your armour is ablated away – and if you use your rifle on the three-round setting, you need to make sure you're using the burst sub-table, not the primary one.

This love of little details, a reliance on reference tables and occasional glimpses of old-school approaches to GMing – it's been a while since an adventure suggested making players suffer for "the sin of powergaming" – does make *Cyberpunk Red* feel weirdly archaic at times. Whether this is a positive or not will depend on you and your playgroup, but it certainly does give the game a distinct feel and tone.

Indeed, the original *Cyberpunk* was a child of the '80s and *Red* still seems to have one shiny black boot firmly planted there. Spandex-clad 'Chromatic Rock' is still the sound of rebellion in its version of the 2040s, mirror shades are the height of fashion and mundane objects are made to sound cooler by sticking the word 'cyber' in front of them.

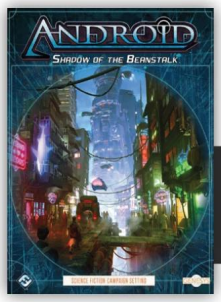
If you read that and feel yourself shrinking away, *Cyberpunk Red* may not be for you. It's a game that pulses with a love for the genre's aesthetics, its themes and its retro-futuristic vision of our future. If you can drop any sense of irony and embrace the babble about Black ICE, get cybered up and go throw down with a booster gang, you're going to have run with the *Jumpstart Kit*.

In fact, the biggest problem with the box set is that it currently acts as an introduction to nothing in particular. At time of writing the full version of *Red* doesn't even have a release date, so if you do fall in love with the world you're forced to jump back to an earlier version of the game or cool your heels until the final product hits.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

You couldn't get more cyberpunk if you tried. This starter set kicks off with a shower of neon glamour, it's just a pity there's no full game to move on to.



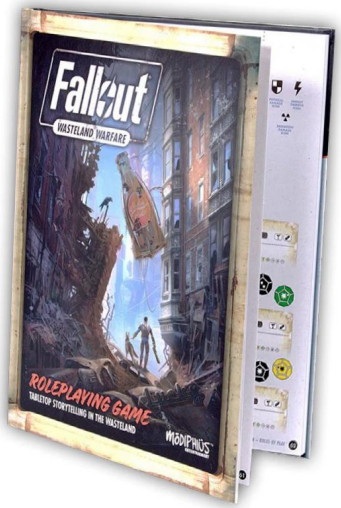
TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
GENESYS: SHADOW OF THE BEANSTALK

Cyberpunk Red's rules are a little more fiddly than the *Genesys* system, but it also comes with an attitude that its more generic cousin can't quite match.

FALLOUT: WASTELAND WARFARE RPG

Designer: Modiphius | **Artist:** Various

137 | 13+ | £25



Looking over the ramshackle weirdness that is Modiphius' first stab at a *Fallout* RPG an old quote comes to mind: "If it looks stupid but it works, it isn't stupid." This roleplaying add-on for *Fallout* miniatures game *Wasteland Warfare* is ungainly and unintuitive, but somehow it manages to cobble enough clever ideas together until it works. Somehow.

Honestly, though, this all feels rather appropriate for a game set in the retro-futuristic *Fallout* universe, where armour bodged together from scrap metal is the rule of the day. Hell, even the recent run of video games are notorious for weird glitches and the baffling mechanics, so why should the tabletop version be any different?

Perhaps the biggest factor behind this is the fact it's an expansion for a miniatures skirmish game, from which it inherits a lot of its core rules. This brings a couple of benefits to the table, such as the top-notch combat system and a range of rather beautiful models, but also ties the RPG to a set of colourful custom dice and leaves every non-combat challenge feeling rather thrown together.

Every time you take on a task, whether that's blasting a super mutant with a laser cannon or hacking a door open, you'll toss a rainbow of dice related to your skills, each of which brings its own weird benefits. Some just add in successes, others cancel out obstacles or reduce the difficulty of a check.

If that sounds a little confusing, that's because it is. There are a lot of mechanics being forced into weird positions to make things (more or less) flow, but once you make sense of all the symbols – and there are a lot of symbols to memorise – a strange kind of genius begins to shine. As you level-up your skills, for example, you don't just add numbers to them. Instead, you buy different coloured dice, each of which allow you to tailor the exact way you want your abilities to work.

Sometimes strange constraints and limitations can produce wonderfully creative solutions, and this is certainly the case here. If you want something smooth and easy to use, you'd be advised to wait for Modiphius' upcoming standalone *Fallout* RPG, but if you have the *Wasteland Warfare* base game sitting on a shelf and want to glimpse something truly unique, this book is a fascinating slice of design.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

ROBOTECH: THE MACROSS SAGA

Designer: Strange Machine Games

264+ | 13+ | £50

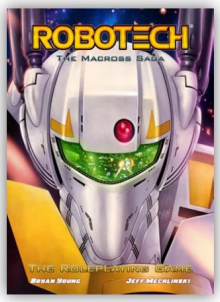
There are some licensed RPGs that can extend their appeal beyond committed fans of the original work. *Robotech* probably isn't one of them, but that might actually be a good thing.

The reason for this is that *Robotech* is – to put it simply – weird. The original show was a wonderful mess of giant robots and pop singers battling intergalactic giants. It blended cartoony pulp action with high stakes drama, and felt so tightly bound to the 80s that you half expected the DVDs to come packaged with their own leg warmers and hair spray.

This collection of quirks has led to an RPG that tries to simultaneously lay down rules for complex mech-on-mech combat, while leaving room for inspirational speeches and massed naval combat to make their own contributions to the action. It's a mess, but one that feels very true to the source material.

It helps that the core rules that govern most of the action in *Robotech RPG* are incredibly light. A pilot with the 'Rapidfire' skill, for example, isn't restricted to using it when she's emptying a magazine into an enemy on the battlefield. She could also use it to charm her way into a social situation with a steady stream of one-liners, or race through dozens of possible solutions to a technical problem.

Things only begin to get truly complicated once you hit combat, where the game's number-crunching, stat-loving side comes out to play. These skirmishes are



doubtlessly fun – and for many fans will be a major part of the game's appeal – but they're also a surprisingly slow-paced affair compared to the more dramatic scenes.

If the team behind *Robotech: The Macross Saga RPG* had tried to sand down the weird bumps and awkward edges of the source material to fit a more mass-market appeal it would probably be an unremarkable game consigned to the shelves of existing fans. As it is, the finished product is a little ungainly and hard to recommend to anyone who isn't instantly drawn to *Robotech*'s curious premise, but it's wonderfully unique. And perhaps that's enough.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

BEST LAID PLANS

You've spent hours planning your next campaign to perfection, only for your players to pull it to pieces within minutes. How do you expect the unexpected?

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

©Wizards 2013

The adventure had barely started when we got our first sight of the villain. He was an orc warlord responsible for drumming up a wave of angry fanaticism among the neighbouring tribes and, when our intrepid band of heroes turned up to investigate the situation, he was busy doing what he did best – giving a rabble-rousing speech in a subterranean coliseum.

Aware of many parties' 'fireball first, consider consequences later' attitude, our GM had carefully placed the warlord – whose name entirely coincidently happened to bear a striking similarity to a prominent American politician – several hundred feet away from our vantage point and surrounded him with a fearsome array of guards that could have reduced us all to unpleasant red smears while we were still trying to get our heroic speeches out.

It was abundantly clear that attempting to take on the beast right at that moment would be both suicidal and downright stupid. The sensible course of action would be to observe what happened, track down a few stragglers and probe the source of Warlord Krump's mysterious powers of oration. This would eventually lead us to his shady dark-elven backers and allow us to uncover a conspiracy with implications that would rock the very foundations of the world.

About a minute later, Krump was dead.

His downfall was the result of an intricate plan involving magical portals, some illusory elves and a rogue who was worryingly skilled at stabbing people in the back. Explaining it in detail would take up the rest of this article, but the important thing was that – once the dust settled – our GM's careful plans were a cobweb of tattered threads that were suddenly missing their core.

He called for a ten-minute break while he worked out what the hell would happen next, while the party celebrated by opening a new bottle of wine.

PLAN TO FAIL

There's a saying that instructors use when they're teaching people to safely use weapons, that goes, "Don't point this at anything you don't want destroyed." When I'm talking to folks who are looking to take up the mantle of a GM I use a similar version, with parties of adventurers taking the role usually occupied by the loaded shotgun.

Players can and will break every plan you can think of, whether that involves wandering off in pursuit of a side character they've taken a sudden liking to or somehow managing to stumble across the mystery before it really gets going. Sometimes these shake-ups just change the flow of a session away from its expected path, but sometimes they manage to derail it completely.

I spend enough time behind the GM's screen to know how annoying it can be to have your plans for an epic sea voyage become dust on the wind because you forgot you gave the party a teleportation scroll 20 sessions ago. When it does happen, however – and once the initial wave of confusion and blind rage has abated – I always calmly remind myself of how awesome it felt when we dropped an arcane beatdown on Krump.

After all, one of the biggest factors that separates tabletop RPGs from their digital counterparts and makes them so entertaining is their ability to adapt to the unexpected; to allow the party to use a combination of quick wits and lucky rolls to pull off the impossible and truly make an impact on the game world. If you go into a game already knowing everything that can possibly happen and actively fighting against the players' efforts to forge their own story, everybody's fun is going to suffer.

> "If you go into a game already knowing everything that can possibly happen, everybody's fun is going to suffer."

READY FOR ANYTHING

So, if you accept that players can and will take the most unexpected path possible, does that mean there's no point in preparing anything at all? Should we all just GM by the seat of our pants, improvising absolutely everything and dispensing with our own stories?

Obviously not. While there are plenty of folks out there who enjoy freeform improvisation or the completely sandbox approach – where the GM drops the players in a fleshed-out world but doesn't give them any prods in the direction of any plot – most of us prefer at least some structure.

The key to making this work without railroading your players revolves around finding ways to let them bend your plans without breaking them. You need to somehow convince yourself to view the NPCs, plot points and even entire continents you've had to cut from your campaign at the last minute not as wasted material, but rather a resource that you can mine further down the road.

You can also help yourself by viewing the worlds you create as exactly that: worlds that react and adapt to changes rather than a simple string of events that are designed to proceed one after the other.

When we stumped the Krump, for example, the plot didn't melt into nothingness simply because we did something unexpected. The GM needed to make a million-and-one changes on the fly, but soon he was able to piece together how the warlord's underlings might react to his sudden downfall and lead us into the conflict with his dark-elven backers.

Sure, it happened a little earlier than expected, but in the end it all worked out with a minimum of disruption. Though we did hear a lot of cursing and ripping notepaper while we sorted out the wine…

A TWO-WAY STREET

As I mentioned earlier, one of the best things about tabletop RPGs is the fact that you can do anything you want so long as it's within the confines of the rules (and even that depends on how generous the GM is feeling), no matter if it tangents off from whatever adventure or story was planned out in advance.

Another one of the reasons why we play these games is that we get to hang out with other people and work together to have fun. And part of having fun as a group means not messing with the GM's plans for the sake of it.

Creating and running an adventure, even if it's one pulled straight from a book, takes time and effort. Those are both things that should be respected and appreciated, and while anybody who sits behind the GM screen should be prepared for things to go off the rails that doesn't mean that players should toss pennies on the line just because they want to see something crash.

If your GM is waggling a couple of plot hooks before the party and none of you are interested in biting, it's time for the group to sit down out of the game and discuss what everyone is looking for. Likewise, if keep having to drag your players away from their plans to set up as sky pirates so they can raid another dungeon, you may want to have a chat about the campaign's direction.

If all else fails, it's amazing how many sudden cracks in your campaign can be plastered over by a sudden dragon attack. Few people look that hard for plot holes when everything is on fire, after all.

MY LITTLE PONY: TAILS OF EQUESTRIA: THE OFFICIAL MOVIE SOURCEBOOK

A roleplaying expansion worth ponying up for

Designer: River Horse team | **Artist:** Various

1+ £20

There are many things in this weird and wonderful world of ours that simply don't make any sense, like dark matter, classic *D&D* grappling rules and the fact they cast Sean Connery as a Spaniard in *Highlander*, despite much of the film taking place in Scotland. To this list we can now add the fact that an RPG supplement tied in to a *My Little Pony* film is actually pretty darn good.

If we're being fair, though, once the sheer weirdness of that statement has washed over us, it really shouldn't be particularly surprising. After all, River Horse's base *Tails of Equestria* proved itself a nifty little RPG when last we looked at it, providing a sleek framework that was simple enough for children to grasp alongside solid mechanics that adults could have un-ironic fun with it too.

The Official Movie Sourcebook takes the game and expands it in about every way possible, with the film's own journey beyond that safe borders of Equestria serving as an excuse for adding on a whole raft of options for both GMs and players alike. While you may not feel the need to use it all depending on how your own adventures pan out, the amount of new content on hand is impressive when you consider that the whole thing clocks in at less than 100 pages.

Within that, you get everything from simple faction and reputation mechanics to rules for playing as a smooth-talking cat or a buccaneering parrot. If this was a different RPG aimed at a different audience the lack of in-depth character customisation could come across as shallow, but in the context of *Tails of Equestria* it feels simple and user-friendly instead.

A handful of the new player options might be confusing to children or even older RPG novices – such as the 'rogue' talent, which involves downgrading or upgrading dice in return for future benefits – but they aren't likely to create any problems that can't be solved with the help of a patient GM. Indeed, the book throws out just enough information that you could easily run a game that uses elements of *My Little Pony: The Movie* without actually having watched it (or, alternatively, for those who napped through most of it while taking children to the cinema).

Honestly the only part of the book that falls flat in places is the introductory adventure, *The Beasts of Black Skull Island.* That has much more to do with the layout rather than the actual writing, however, with the long, unbroken sections of text making it hard to keep track of what's happening as you run players through it at the table.

That's a minor complaint though, and pales in comparison to the rest of the book; though this might just be the bright colours and gentle fonts speaking, *The Official Movie Sourcebook* is packed with an air of real joy that's hard to ignore.

From cover to cover, it gives the distinct impression that it knows full well how silly it's being, and just doesn't care. It's playing Snap and giggling with its friends while the more serious RPG books exchange barbs across the poker table.

If you can read through almost 100 pages of pirate airships, feline smugglers and a cartoony version of the classic mimic monster without feeling a foolish grin worming its way onto your face, this probably isn't for you – but, then again, neither is *Tails of Equestria* as a whole.

If you're planning to run a game for either some *My Little Pony*-obsessed children or a handful of adults with a willingness to get silly, however, *The Official Move Sourcebook* provides a whole heap of fun new ways to play.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

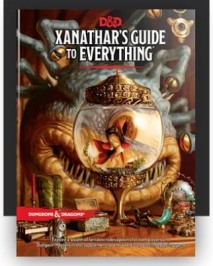


WE SAY

If you're already enjoying your time in Equestria and are looking for room to expand, you owe it to yourself to pick up *The Official Movie Sourcebook.*

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... XANATHAR'S GUIDE TO EVERYTHING

If you liked the *D&D* expansion but thought it would be improved if it was about ponies conquering evil through the power of friendship, you're in luck.



MY LITTLE PONY: TAILS OF EQUESTRIA: THE STORY TELLING GAME

Is this kid-friendly introduction to roleplaying worth ponying up for?

Designer: River Horse team | **Artist:** Various

2+ £25

The idea of teaching your kids how to play an RPG can be an appealing one; roleplaying can encourage creative thinking, establish concepts of morality and co-operation, build stronger relationships between players, and become a relatively cheap and meaningful way to spend free evenings. In practice with younger players, however, it can be a frustrating experience of trying to stimulate improvisation and allow them to lead the story – not to mention the trouble of explaining (or simplifying on-the-fly) some of the more fiddly systems involved.

Tails of Equestria aims to provide a helpful mid-way point to full-blooded roleplaying, boiling down many of the genre's staple mechanics and elements to a pure, accessible form, wrapped up in the welcoming setting of *My Little Pony*.

The book is designed to be read by an adult GM – who can be an RPG fan or not – offering helpful asides that explain how to guide the young players' creation of their PCs ('pony characters') and subsequent adventuring around the eponymous fantasy world. The tone strikes a wonderful line between informative and easy-going, providing a frankly surprising amount of depth in a clear, digestible manner. There are plenty of references to TV show *Friendship is Magic* that provide a comfortable point of familiarity for fans, while a dedicated tips chapter acts as a gentle way of introducing overarching RPG concepts to players and the GM alike.

The book itself is a solid hardback tome with the vivid colour palette you'd expect. It's effectively structured, flowing from presenting the basics through to an included three-part campaign crammed with cameos sure to excite fans.

While the pages are laid out well and the images are useful as a way to illustrate the concepts, the inside generic artwork and stills from the TV show pale in comparison with the beautiful custom art on the cover. Several of the images are also blurry, and there are multiple typos – disappointing, but not a dealbreaker.



When it comes to gameplay systems, *Tails* balances accessibility and depth with unexpected tact. Character creation aspects such as class and race are condensed to three types of pony – Earth ponies, pegasi and unicorns – with positive talents and negative quirks providing fleshed-out personalities, as well as additional gameplay options. This is expanded by the presence of the six in-universe Elements of Harmony, which present a simplified and thematic alternative to the alignment system. One particularly endearing detail is the inclusion of boxes on the character sheet so that players can draw their pony avatar and symbolic 'cutie mark.'

Tests and challenges are resolved using a simple system where the level of one of the three key traits – body, mind and charm – relates directly to a particular die, from d4 up to d20. Difficulty (decided by the GM) dictates the success result required, but – true to *My Little Pony*'s philosophy – players can spend one or more of their friendship tokens to influence the result, with the group able to work together to overcome the odds. It may be basic, but the system works like a charm, capturing the can-do attitude of the TV show and highlighting *Tails*' greatest characteristic: the belief that anyone (or 'anypony') can achieve whatever they put their mind to.

Combat is equally easy to resolve – nobody dies, but they can lose stamina and bow out. There are economy, equipment and levelling systems, too, which skew towards the more advanced end of the scale as they introduce additional effects and attributes as players acclimatise to the ABCs of RPGs.

The campaign in the book will wrap up in an hour or two, so you'll need to wait for supplements or go it alone to continue the story – and your own motivation to do so will probably come down to your investment in the world of *My Little Pony*. Yet, there's more than enough mechanical strength in this core book to construct a solid, engaging campaign for younger players that maintains all the right ingredients of its bigger roleplaying siblings.

Make no mistake: this may be a RPG aimed at kids, but it's far from just tail fluff. ■

MATT JARVIS

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... DUNGEONS & DRAGONS...

It may be ponies and unicorns instead of rogues and wizards, but Tails of Equestria offers a highly accessible and surprisingly purposeful introduction to RPG basics.



CONCLUSION

How easily you and your kids take to *Tails of Equestria* will likely depend on your affinity for *My Little Pony*. If you're already invested in the fantasy world, the RPG mechanics and systems here are refined to such a welcoming – yet meaningful – level that it's hard to resist the game's charms.



DOOMED

How does the world end? With a bang, or a dice roll? We talk to the creators of MÖRK BORG about birthing their apocalyptic doom metal RPG

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**



There are lots of ways to try and introduce *MÖRK BORG*. You can call it a Doom Metal RPG, you can talk about the Old School Revival movement, you can just show people the lush printing quality and the design throughout. But really, the only thing that comes close to properly explaining what *MÖRK BORG* is, is to explain: "at the start of every day, you roll a dice to find out whether the world is going to end."

Now *that's MÖRK BORG*.

We spoke to Pelle Nilsson (the writer of the game) and Johan Nohr (the artist) about how they brought this extremely metal RPG to life.

It started as a single-page RPG, and as a facilitation of the way that many of us end up playing these adventures, "We were playing RPGs really late, and we wanted to create characters really quick," says Nilsson, explaining the group wanted to be able to get to the good bit fast, without picking equipment from long lists. Instead you can roll your equipment, traits, and stats in no time at all "you can have a character in five minutes, or less – if you don't use the Scumbirther." This is an online tool for automatically generating a character from classes included in the core book. With it, you can be ready to play in seconds.

The setting is heavy, but the words are light. The pair opine that there's a dearth of short, snappy RPGs that do the kind of work that *MÖRK BORG* does in 12 pages. We all agree it's nice to read 150 pages about a world, but it certainly feels better to jump into a setting quickly, knowing that as a GM you have absorbed everything you should be aware of from the book after one sitting.

DO YOU WANT TO SAVE THE WORLD?

MÖRK BORG's world is one ruled by two two-headed basilisks, who have predicted the end will come. The various locales are described in sparsely detailed single paragraphs, "most of that text was written in one day," says Nilsson. These minimal details do a lot of work, the forest of Sarkash has spread 'unnaturally fast,' and the description asks the question 'hasn't it grown warmer in this usually cold place? Do you hear the frantic scratching?'.

In the Valley of the Unfortunate Dead 'the soil, the very air, is lethal,' bringing about a kind of desperate zombie ennui. Kergus is a frosty, blasted place with a neurotic queen who draws colour out of everything she holds in her gaze.

In short, it's a terrible place.

"The interesting thing that appears when we play is: 'this world is so bad, is it worth saving? Why?' Because there's no good in it," says Nohr. When pressed the pair give the answer that, even if the world is awful, it's the one you live in. You're going to take your chances when they come up.

Nilsson suggests that players might be enticed to delve into a dungeon for an artefact or to complete a ritual that might reverse the prophecy. "You also have these two-headed basilisks that *maybe*, because they know the prophecy, can change its outcome if you give them something they want," says Nohr, before adding with a shrug, "some people just take this opportunity to go *Mad Max*."

Nilsson smiles through this. As the writer you have to wonder what his intention is for how the world ends. "I'm quite open minded actually," he says of the world *not* ending, "I've not decided yet. Every gaming group can decide that."

Nohr adds, "Look at our own world, it's kind of ending. Look at all the climate change, wars and viruses, we're still going about our lives – people ignore it." *MÖRK BORG's* world might be closer to home than we think.

The world ends on a dice roll. At the start of the day you roll a dice, its type depending on whether the players want years of pain, a bleak half-year, a fall in anguish, a cruel month, or, our favourite, rolling a D2 for 'the end is nigh.' If you roll a one, a D66 is rolled and the table of miseries consulted – applying an effect, after interpretation, to the world as a whole for the rest of the campaign. For example, one of the less ambiguous miseries takes effect in the forest of Sarkash, 'fog and dusk shall breathe beneath the waking



trees. That which was hewed by man shall now hew in its turn.'

Which may make you wish you'd rolled a pair of secateurs, rather than the flail.

RULES LIGHT, HEAVY EVERYTHING ELSE

The RPG takes from the OSR movement in the fact there are few rules. The well-worn phrase about OSR is 'less rules, more rulings' – which leads some players to be put off. This is often because of the impression that it's a 'less fair' roleplaying environment. Assuming more rules makes for fairer games. The structure of *Dungeons and Dragons*, or the various calculations we have to make in *Call of Cthulhu* for our rolls are perceived to provide a safety net. A safe table or rule to reference in a pinch.

But for a certain group of people, *MÖRK BORG* is entirely perfect. There's something really accessible about the game. Nilsson explains a story he's heard of a 12 year old running a game of *MÖRK BORG* for her father's roleplaying group with zero problems.

The game just trusts you to have fun, even if it is a bit more work. "It's just how we play," says Nohr, "We don't want our hands held."

The world is sparse and simple, the descriptions ready to be improvised from. The packed-in starter scenario *Rot Black Sludge* gives GMs just enough to play out the mood of a scene, a description of 'sad violin music' coming from a space a couple of rooms away, or a strange smell, is all that's really needed to begin scene setting.

"Someone said that we don't have a GM section in the book, but we have the art – and that's the GM section," says Nohr, laughing. "It's very cinematic play in *MÖRK BORG*" adds Nilsson.

While this is something we attribute to the OSR movement, *MÖRK BORG* isn't beholden to it, "we never set out to do a retro-clone. That's not what we wanted. We've never been like, Oh, 'how would they have done it in the 70s?'" says Nohr.

The book functions alone, but for some there is a desire to use it as a supplementary set of rules. *Powered by the Apocalypse* is one such option, as is straight up *BX* or *AD&D*. But free forming it with anything is totally fine, according to the designers. They comment that when you've bought the book, it's not their book anymore.

The mechanics are very simple. Combat is handled by players rolling both attack and defence tests. If your attack roll passes, you hit, if you fail a defence test , you get hit. You're usually rolling against a 12, higher being a pass. Your attributes are modifiers to these rolls. There are only four stats for your character anyway – what can't you do with strength, presence, agility and toughness?

TURNING THE TABLES

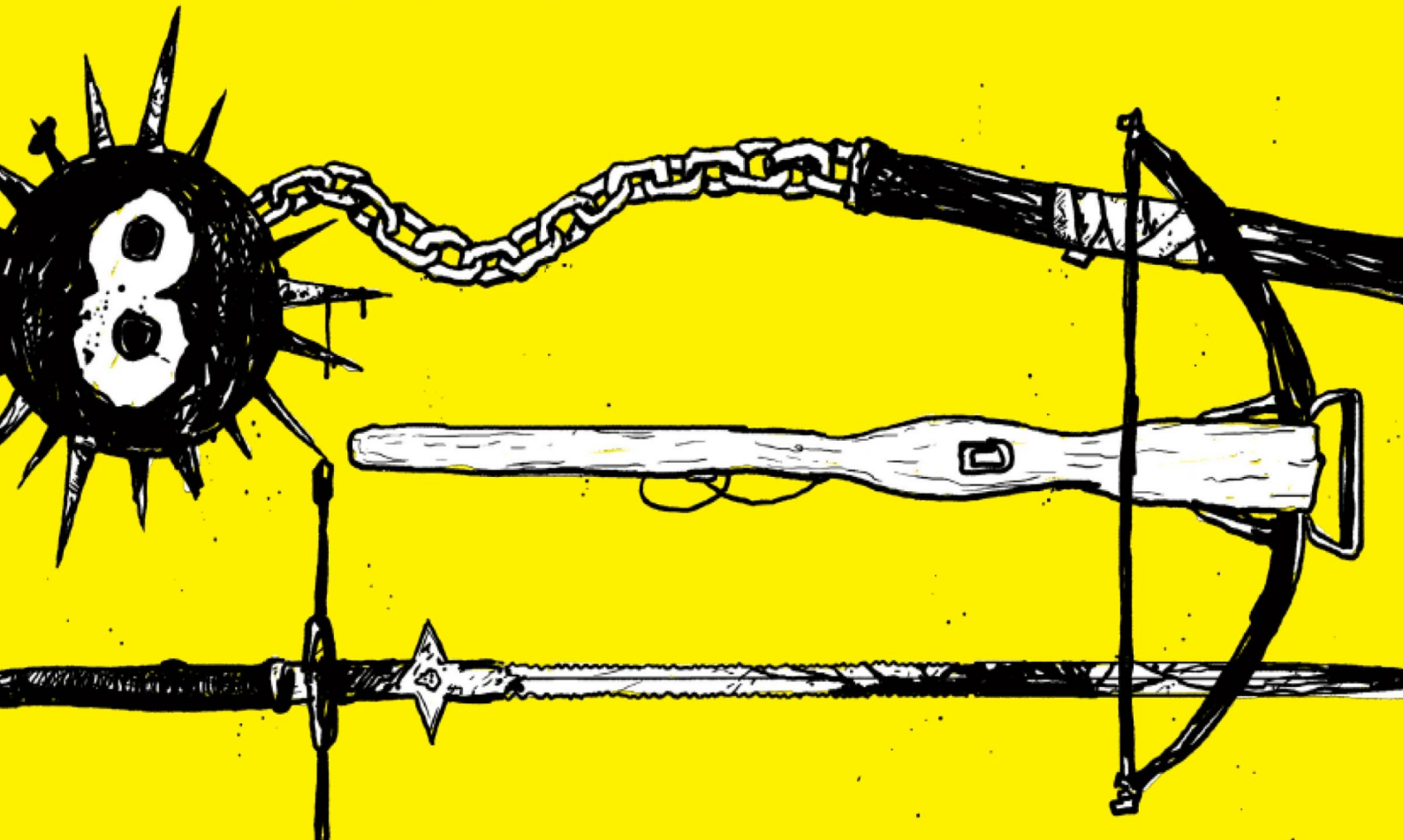
There are some slightly more complicated aspects to the game of course. The introduction of specific traits for monsters tends to add a little spice.

An interesting example is the troll, a huge creature with tons of HP. This part is unsurprising, but there is an addition of it having a very low morale, which makes it run after being hit in a round of combat. This is then paired with the fact that it never forgets who struck it and may return – with all healed HP added to its stats, and a D6 added to its attack. This creates a narrative that sees played stalked by an ever-growing, but still timid, creature that wants revenge. There's a striking image of an impossibly large troll attempting to sneak through trees towards the party, despite the fact it dwarfs the forest.

Equally, the goblins all carry curses that will transform players into their kind. If the creature continues to live D6 days after the initial attack, the players who joined combat with it will soon be turned into goblins themselves. This makes capturing goblins extremely dangerous, because it's simply too easy to succumb to their curse.

Both of these interactions give you some flavour of how campaigns will soon go off the rails. There's unlikely to be tidy stories of nipping down to the bottom of a dungeon and returning to continue a main quest arc. The distractions here in the form of monsters, starvation or the environment will become driving forces in your games.

"I think players want to be surprised," says Nohr, "and they want to see the tables turn on them in a way," hinting that there is a desire in some player to see the worst this dark world can offer.





> "If you're having fun, you're playing it right"

Tables themselves form another part of the dark flavour of the game. Some in the book, like the table for generating your party background, comes with the instruction to throw a knife at the page to generate it (or roll a D20). We think you should probably roll the dice, but it's your game.

And the answers to these tables are often deeply thought provoking in terms of how the adventure will be played out. The use of magic in the game, or powers, is limited and somewhat randomised – and the failure table is a joy. One such arcane catastrophe describes your skeleton being possessed and wanting to escape the fleshy prison it is trapped in. That's you and all of your organs. This forces a strength test in fretful situations where the skeleton may try and drown the player character. Fun right? More fun is the line added for the GM only, 'when you die, you become a zombie.'

Character creation provides wild table-based fun too, for example, NPC characters can be rolled as companions. The most notable being Barbarister the Incredible Horse, a talking horse who is magical, intelligent and vain. Convince him, or rather, the GM controlling him, and he may help you with presence tests. Alongside this there's opportunities to apply 'six moderately tame rats' to your enemies, or to get a nasty nick from a snarky sentient ancestral sword that hates you.

A COMMUNITY CULT

There's something of a community angle to *MÖRK BORG*. There's a whole album that's been created for the game by GNOLL, a brooding collection of dungeon synthwave. It was available briefly on tape before selling out. The English translation was completed by Patrick Stuart (*Silent Titans, Veins of the Earth*), a particular favourite of the pair.

In both these cases, they simply just asked, "I think it was just an Instagram message," says Nilsson, of approaching the band, laughing. It's been a casual engagement of just seeing what can happen. "Throughout this project, we just haven't been afraid to ask," adds Nohr.

This translates to the wider *MÖRK BORG* world. The website invites fans to submit their work to expand the world. This content is deemed to be part of the *MÖRK BORG Cult,* and will, if Nilsson and Nohr like it, be designed and polished up to sit as expansions, supplements and adventures.

So far the fan reaction has been great, with rules for hunting and moving in the overworld being added as well as new adventures and classes. These are distributed for free, so there's really no reason not to integrate the parts you like into the game. But if you wanted to get involved, where would you start?

"Lots of people make classes – it's quite easy to begin with that," says Nilsson, "but we also like lots of tables. Small dungeons and stuff like that. But not very long stories about the world, we want tables and small things."

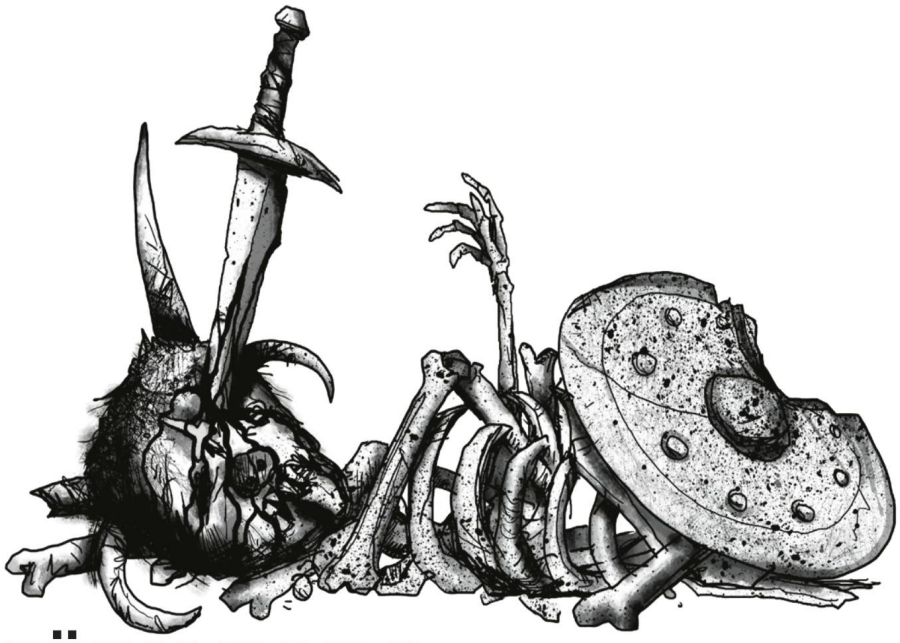
Artefacts, NPCs, little additional rules that people can add to the game are mentioned. Critically both creators suggest to avoid overwriting it, there's plenty of other games to turn into novels. This is a toolbox approach to creating flexible RPGs that suit the people playing them.

"And no plus-one damage long swords," Nohr adds, "it's boring."

The collaborators both talk about their desire to add more to the game in coming years, it's hard to ignore the buzz around it. But they're cautious "We don't just want to make a module book. We want to keep on making something unique somehow. So, we'll see," says Nilsson, "It's, it's impossible for me, and I know it's impossible for you, [he gestures to Nohr] to stop drawing, writing and making stuff."



Nohr closes by returning us to the beating, tar-filled heart of *MÖRK BORG*, "The idea was to have a game where the apocalypse meant something. There's all these 'post-apocalypse' games where the end didn't really 'take.' We thought it would be interesting to see what would happen if there was a game where the world ends, and you have to burn the book."



MÖRK BORG

Doom has come

Designers: Pelle Nilsson & Johan Nohr

86 | 18+ | £30

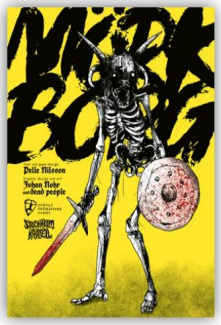
From its name to its tone to the design of its rulebook, everything about *MÖRK BORG* is pushed far beyond what common sense tells you the limits of conventional RPGs could – and possibly should – be. The result is a pile of punkish occult weirdness splattered in ink-black and neon yellow, beautiful to look at and hilariously bleak to play.

On a very fundamental level, the game is an incredibly lightweight take on old-school, *Dungeons & Dragons*-esque fantasy roleplaying, but with the grim and gritty dial turned all the way up. And then twisted a bit more. And then bashed off with a bit of broken femur.

The result is a world so monstrously dark and brutal that it wouldn't look out of place on a death metal album cover. Everything from the trees to the player characters, who can't really be described as anything even approaching 'heroes,' are decayed, corrupted and limping towards a miserable death.

However, rather than being a depressing slogfest, a read through the *MÖRK BORG* rulebook is utterly captivating, simply because it's a work of art. More Hieronymus Bosch than Picasso, to be sure, but art nonetheless.

Every single page in the book is a uniquely designed labour of love intended to provoke a reaction beyond simply explaining rules or background settings. Medieval woodcuts mix with ink-spattered sketches, while silvery inlays pick out warped and decayed titles. There's no attempt to keep fonts, sizes and layouts even vaguely consistent – indeed, it wouldn't come as a surprise to find that the designers had deliberately ripped out anything that threatened to make a pattern.



This gleeful dismissal of conventional design practise makes a book that's damnably tricky to use at the table or as a teaching tool, but honestly that doesn't seem to be the point. *Mörk Borg* describes itself as "rules-light, heavy everything else" and it isn't wrong about that.

The core of the gameplay will be familiar to anybody who's ever touched a variation of *D&D*, with most tasks being conquered with a 20-sided dice and a sprinkling of addition, but in the same way that a fire-gutted house is familiar. Every rule and sub-system that wasn't needed to keep things standing has been ripped out, and what little that's left is scorched black.

There are no magical races to play as, no tangled tables of saves and bonuses and no levels. Characters might get an advancement when the GM wills it, but to be honest it seems tough for any of them to survive long enough for this to come up too often.

The biggest question that springs to mind as you read the rulebook and parse pages of weird prophecies and rules about spitting phlegm in your enemies' eyes, is that of quite how serious the writers are being.

You could easily read the entire thing as one big joke – a setting so grim and depressing that it passes out the other end and becomes weirdly funny. However, you could very easily treat the either thing as completely sincere; as a world and a game filled with genuine horrors and soul-sapping tragedy.

This is perhaps *MÖRK BORG*'s greatest strength. If it was obviously a pastiche of grittier-than-thou fantasy settings the endless nastiness and hopelessness would quickly become depressing. Likewise, the game wouldn't be anywhere near as fun to squelch through if there weren't so many entirely serious attempts at its dank medieval horror squatting on game store shelves across the world.

Indeed, as both a setting and as a game it only really makes sense within the wider context of roleplaying in general, and old-school *D&D* clones in particular. There aren't any real guidelines for what the players are doing in this world or even an explanation of what being a game master entails. Instead, *MÖRK BORG* makes the rather reasonable assumption that everybody picking up an art-punk RPG decorated in shades of angry wasp already have the basics buried in their brains.

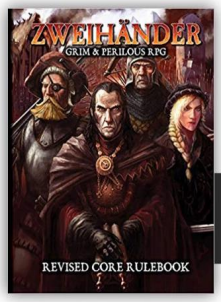
On a logical, reasoned level this makes it rather a mixed bag. The layout is tough to navigate, the rules are functional but nothing you can't bodge together from a dozen other old-school *D&D* clones, and the world is hopeless to the point of being nonsensical.

MÖRK BORG isn't much into logic or reason, though. It's about style and energy; grim humour and gritty imagery. And no, it doesn't really tick all the boxes of a well-built modern RPG, but it absolutely nails everything to do with being one hell of an experience.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

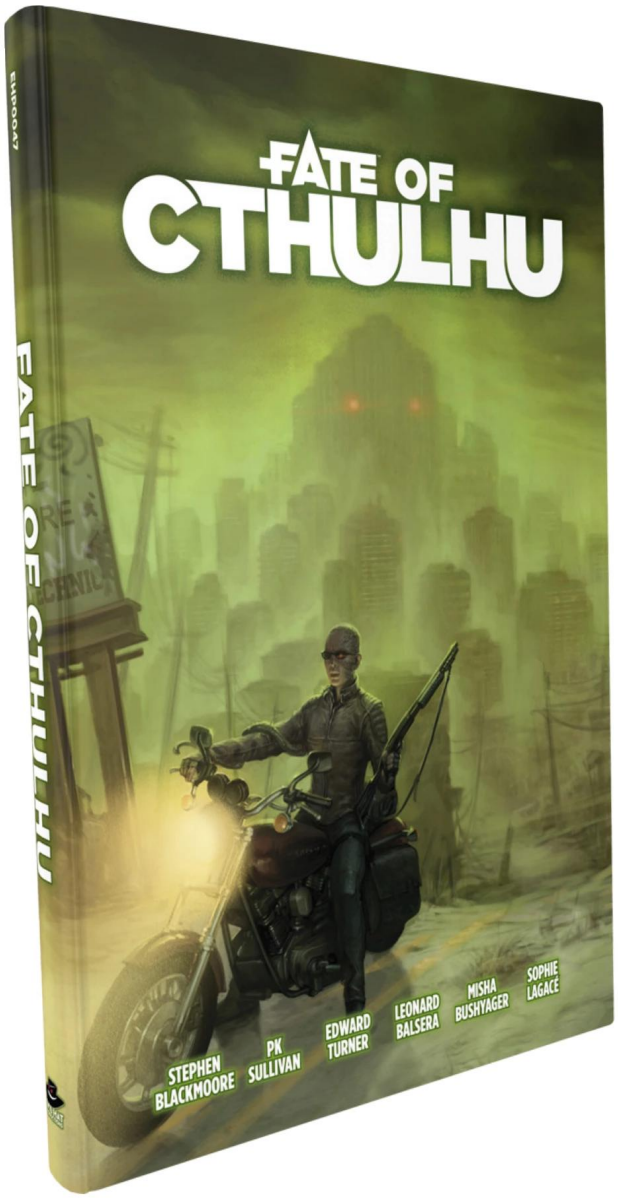
PLAY IT? YES

If it was any darker it'd be a black hole, but there's a sackful of twisted charm and disturbing style in this slim little book.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *ZWEIHÄNDER*

Same grim, gritty tone, love of old-school ideas and ever-present umlaut, but with more stripped-down rules and prettier design



FATE OF CTHULHU

Give me your pants and your tentacles

Designer: Evil Hat Productions

256 | 13+ | £29

You can't fling a tentacle into a gaming store without having a sucker latch onto another re-imagining of Lovecraftian horror, but *Fate of Cthulhu* manages to distinguish itself from the herd with two tools: explosions and time-travel.

The time travel thing isn't just an excuse for the setting, which reads like an eldritch take on Terminator, but also feeds into some of the game's coolest ideas. The result can be a little mind-bending to begin with, but once things start flowing – and you stop worrying about which tense to use – you can appreciate how this little shift in perspective beings so many fresh ideas to the table. Perhaps the most obvious of these is the structure.

Like many other games drawn from Lovecraft's writing, *Fate of Cthulhu* is all about trying to prevent the arrival of some terrible cosmic horror fated to destroy the world. However, this time around the party has time-travellers on their side, and they're armed with the most powerful weapon in the world – information.

This means that each mini-campaign in the book, which should take maybe a dozen nights of gaming to get through, gives the players a to-do list of pivotal apocalyptic events that need to be disrupted. The details of the missions will always be murky and there are still plenty of secrets to uncover, but the players still enter every adventure with a few names, dates and locations already in the bag. In other games it would be like they hadn't exactly read the adventure cover-to-cover, but had skimmed enough to get the gist of what's going on.

When this works well it can be an absolute blast. It can give you the tools to pull an Ocean's 11 on the bad guys, infiltrating organisations and planning extraction routes, but the wibbly-wobbly nature of time travel means there's still plenty of room for things to go wrong.

It's a little irritating, however, that after handing out such a cool toy, many of the pre-written campaigns immediately try to snatch it back. Several of the evil entities looking to chew up the planet have weird temporal powers of their own and work to change things up wherever possible.

Yes, it works as an effective way of ramping up the tension and keeping the party off balance, but it also feels like the game should embrace the power of time-travel rather than shy away from it. It's not like a bit of forewarning is going to help an adventurer stand up against shambling dimensional horrors, anyway.

Actually, that last bit might not quite be accurate, as another theme that distinguishes *Fate of Cthulhu* from its more restrained brethren is the toughness and general badass-ery of its heroes. Rather than the vain socialites or stuffy college professors of classic Lovecraftian horror, players step into the shoes of time-travelling soldiers, modern day spies and reformed cultists capable of tossing fire from their hands.

When deformed monstrosities burst through the door, the characters are expected to whip out shotguns and scream defiance, not cower and gibber in the corner. Despite the apocalyptic themes there's an air of frantic, furious energy to *Fate of Cthulhu*. The party doesn't investigate; the party gets things done.

All this action is channelled through a slightly tweaked take on the incredibly free-form Fate system. The core rules about fighting bad guys and making checks are incredibly simple – albeit reliant on custom dice that some might find annoying – but a lot of customisation comes into play with aspects and stunts.

There are little flourishes that help to define your character and the world around you. In practice they stand in for the special powers and abilities used by other RPGs, so you could use them to make a hero an excellent navigator, for example, or to give them a special crushing attack with their mutated claw.

The twist, however, is that the players don't simply pick from a pre-written list buried in the rulebook. Instead, they write their aspects and stunts themselves. Essentially, they get to write their own rules.

There's enough guidance to keep this from being too overwhelming, but it can still be a rather daunting prospect – especially if the players are new to RPGs. If the players can embrace it, however, the limitless options can quickly become inspiring rather than intimidating.

Between the time-travel, the mutations and the free-flowing rules *Fate of Cthulhu* is just about weird enough to work. If nothing else, it brings something new to the rather crowded table of Lovecraft's roleplaying spawn.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

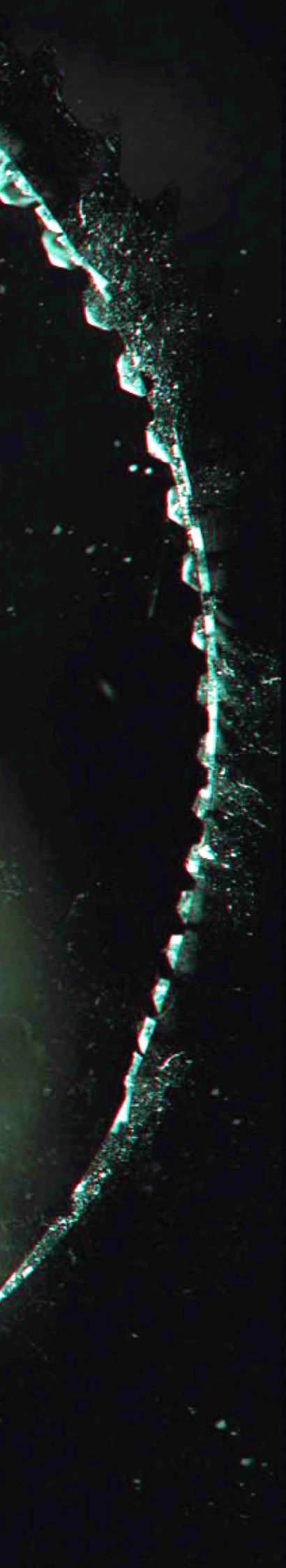
Tired of Lovecraftian tropes? Try shooting them with a rocket launcher alongside time-travelling super-soldiers.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PULP CTHULHU

With a similar tone but very different playstyles, if you enjoy the nonsense of *Pulp Cthulhu* but wish it was a bit more sci-fi then *Fate of Cthulhu* has you covered.





MOTHER KNOWS BEST

In space, only the GM can hear you scream

Words by **Christopher John Eggett** | Images courtesy of **Free League**

The other members of the crew had descended into the dark and cavernous belly of the ship, hoping to find the captain of our original vessel. Here, in the medical bay, something very unfriendly has emerged from an NPC. Recklessly, a member of the crew attempted to kick it hard. This was the same character who had injected herself with what she assumed would be some kind of inoculation. She managed to snatch it from the hands of the scientist, but injected it into the wrong part of her body. Its effectiveness will be unknown without ocular application. In the end, this wouldn't matter. The company man with a gun standing behind her fancied taking a shot at the newly emerged horror. He's not got a great aim. He misses it, and in the process, shoots her in the back.

This isn't the way I expected the first character to die in my playthrough of *Alien RPG*'s standalone cinematic scenario, *Chariot of the Gods*, but it speaks to the breadth and depth of death options in the new game from Free League Publishing. The Swedish developers of *Mutant: Year Zero* and *Tales from the Loop* have taken on the tense space horror of the *Alien* franchise and found so many wonderful ways for us to die on the outer edges of the cosmos. I spoke to Tomas Härenstam, the co-founder and CEO of Free League, who directed and designed the rules for *Alien RPG*, about how the publisher made the vast and threatening universe of Alien into a place where people would want to have adventures.

"Really, what we wanted to do with this RPG is two things. First off, to give a really cinematic experience of playing in an RPG of an *Alien* movie. To get that sense of space horror – mainly from the first *Alien* movie – in the scenarios and also in the mechanics. And the second objective of the game is to give players a chance to really dive into the Alien universe," says Härenstam, alluding to the two game modes which come packed in with the roleplaying game. The latter is the traditional campaign mode of the game, designed for longer play, and giving players the chance to get into the nitty-gritty of life out in the frontiers. The first is the brutal, quick, and deadly cinematic mode. These are 'one-shot' scenarios which are designed to be played out over a few sessions at most, and contain dramatic elements that wouldn't work in the longer campaign mode, like player death.

APPROACHING HORROR

Once you're over the initial excitement of the very idea of an Alien roleplaying game at all, there comes the question of how it could be implemented. It's almost an impossible brief – creating a sci-fi horror scenario where the most famous antagonist in the universe is an unstoppable killing machine, a pure expression of primal terror. What attracts so many to the *Alien* films, especially the first, is the sense of the sublime in the horrors that are being faced. The feeling of godless insignificance of human actions, and existence, when faced with something that represents a fundamental and awesome threat. While in many RPGs there is conflict, there's often a good chance of the protagonists surviving – the 'overcoming the monster' narrative is so well trod that we now often expect to overcome the monster. Here we're not often afforded quite so much leeway. And with multiple storytellers, how can a game approach this kind of horror collaboratively?

"That was the big question," says Härenstam, "Horror in RPGs is always quite tricky because horror is such a visceral emotion. In an RPG that can be hard to get across. And before you can get the actual horror, you have the tension building." Free League approached this problem by including swathes of accessible direction within the book, as well as baking in the required 'stages of horror' for effective terror into the mechanics of the game. The guidance for the 'Games Mother' (a very good, if obvious pun on the name given to the central onboard computers of many ships) includes developing a sense of tension. It encourages those running the game to take time building up the threat of the things in the shadows. The environmental details are also all there to offer the haunted house sense creaking and groaning hallways. Debris strewn medical rooms, and personal quarters all but destroyed in a long-forgotten incident.



And in that, it's also about a sensory experience. The world of *Alien RPG* is dangerous, and not only because of what we do know, but because of what we can't quite make out in the darkness. Hearing a hiss of an airlock somewhere nearby when everyone is accounted for, or of what sounds like footsteps in the shadows or in the walls can trigger all kinds of low-level tension for players. There is scope too, to create a misunderstanding of something in the dark as threat – believing your eyes is the best you can do, and that only goes so far. The ships and systems themselves are also obscuring for player characters. A GM can easily have something reported from the ships systems designed to throw players off, or to alert them to the potential of a threat approaching somewhere in the ship.

And this brings us on to body horror. It wouldn't be *Alien* without the plastic reality of scrungy things bursting forth from NPCs. Härenstam defers to Andrew E. C. Gaska, the writer of the *Chariot of the Gods* cinematic scenario on this aspect. Gaska created much of the setting work for the game, and as such, conjured a great deal of the physical reality players face. In these scenarios there are a number of powerful descriptions for GMs to use that provoke visceral reactions from players. Often these disgusting events happen to NPCs, which is a helpful part of the cinematic mode for GMs, as it's not always going to be easy to find the right tone. "Running scenarios with body horror elements can easily tip over and become too much. You kind of have to hit the right note. I think that can be a challenge. But a fun one." Says Härenstam. Getting this tone right is important because they are often the pay-off of longer-term environmental threats. If the whole game is about building tension to the point of conflict and drama, then overdoing these moments of nastiness could leave things falling flat. Helpfully there is a mechanic built into the game to ensure tension is always being built upon.

"So, it's this kind of increasing tension that will eventually explode in one way or the other," says Härenstam "It's a key thing in the game mechanics themselves. You get these stress dice, which will actually make you more effective. They will help you to an extent – but then if you get too many of them, they will trigger panic effects." The stress and panic system is one of the most important tweaks to Free Leagues own Year Zero system. This system is one of dice pools. You gain dice for your relevant skills, attributes and gear and generally you want to roll sixes. In *Alien RPG* a stressful situation will give you stress dice to roll as well – this works the same way as the other dice for rolling success but rolling a one triggers a panic effect.

"The more stress you have, the more effective you become. But you also increase the chance of rolling ones, which can trigger panic," says Härenstam, "so that's the trade off." This functions with the push mechanic too. If you fail a roll in *Alien RPG* you can always reroll once, but you will add a stress dice to your dice pool. Players have to ask themselves whether they really want to push the dice roll – is it really worth it? With that, there's a risk-reward in every dice roll. Panic can cause knock-on effects for players and their party. These effects can range from developing a nervous twitch that increases the stress levels of nearby player characters, through to freezing in place, going berserk or even turning catatonic. On top of this, rolling too much panic can give you permanent psychological damage in campaign play. "If you suffer really extreme stress effects, you can get permanent psychological damage. That's true. But then this doesn't happen too quickly, but it can happen," says Härenstam.

The effects of stress are one of the background threats, like the rest of the environment. The ships that most of the action takes place on are

clunky, huge beasts. Oil refineries moving through space like slowly drifting trash. They are brutal machines made for utility that our human characters rattle around within, and yet, being in the bellies of these beasts feels like home in comparison with the gaping emptiness of space. That emptiness that you and your crew are floating in dangerous, and your ships comparatively fragile. As such, exploring the rotten space hulks between the stars is exactly as dangerous as you would expect it to be.

"There's more general dangers like blowing a hole in the hull that will decompress an entire section of the ship," says Härenstam, "and that's something that we felt needed to be a part of the game. *Alien* is semi-hard sci-fi I guess, so it's not super realistic in every detail – but we did still feel that space and being on a spaceship needs to feel dangerous in itself. Like radioactivity or a vacuum, there is just a danger to being in space." This makes any actions you take while playing the game seem more threatening and your life more precarious. Your resources are limited too. Not only in the obvious, such as ammunition, but also in the amount of air in your tank – a danger compounded by the fact that when you remove your helmet in an unknown ship full of alien eggs, you don't know what you'll breathe in.

"I think what can really work is when you suffer both [the xenomorph and environmental threats] at the same time. Maybe you start off with facing a xenomorph, and then, something happens that also decompresses part of the ship. Or the other way around; you're out space walking to fix a damaged engine and then something happens with the xenomorph." says Härenstam "you can get that doubling effect that can be really troubling for players and a lot of fun."

With the whole environment against you as well as occasionally being hunted, games of *Alien RPG* can quickly spiral out of control. "I think the difference may be that even though the vacuum and these [environmental threats] are very dangerous, they're kind of dangerous in a way that you can know. At least you have an idea of how it works. Whereas, the xenomorphs are much more unpredictable," says Härenstam. In this there is a statement about how the whole of *Alien RPG* relies on characters taking calculated risks based on information that's obscured from them, whether that's by the dark shadows of a groaning hull or the sometimes unreliable readouts of machines.

When we do come face to face with an Xenomorph, seeing and understanding it more doesn't necessarily make for a better chance of survival. There are no smart choices in that moment. Meeting with an alien doesn't always spell death, but it is unpredictable. "The xenomorphs, the way they attack and the damage they do, that all depends on these signature attacks that are randomized," says Härenstam "which means you're never really sure what they will do. It's never going to be that the xenomorph is just going to do another attack, just like the one they did the round before. And you just know what's going to happen." Theses signature attacks are right out of the films, from tail spikes and head bites to the facehugger's extremely evocative 'The Final Embrace' – which is exactly what you think it is.

THIS TIME IT'S WAR

All of this is to say, you're going to die, a lot. At least in cinematic mode. Yet character death in an RPG doesn't always fit well with the level of investment players may have in their characters.

"That's such a big thing in many games, how to handle character death," says Härenstam, citing the various games from Free League where characters cannot die, such as *Tales from the Loop*. "But in *Alien*, just to sort of get the sense of the movies. I mean, characters must be able to die and they should die quite a lot. In cinematic mode you should be really lucky if you actually make it through alive. Just like in the alien movie, most of the crew, they will die along the way and you have to have that sense here as well."

This is certainly true of my experience in cinematic mode. The players I was 'mothering' through the experience didn't last all that long. They'd split up and ended up in a stressful situation where they made some poor choices and bad rolls. It wasn't a problem though, eliminated players don't stay out for long.

"The cinematic scenarios usually have a number of NPCs that are easily transformed into player characters. You can actually pick up another character and play to finish the scenario, and not have to leave the game," explains Härenstam. There's something videogamey about the way that death is treated in this mode. Insert another coin, and pick up where you left off in another body with new agendas and allegiances. It's great. And, what's more, it's an important and satisfying part of play. "That felt like an important thing to do. The player death is much more part of cinematic play. And those are only meant to last one to three sessions,







probably not more than that. And they are one-shots. So you're not meant to continue playing with these characters."

The deaths you experience, because there is a chance to rejoin later actually feel like a satisfying end to some of your characters. This is in part because of the conflicts you're experiencing while playing, and also because of the speed of play. Cinematic mode is rapid, like returning to a facehugger that you've left in the kennels for a week while you were on holiday. Each scenario takes place over three acts, with a rising tension throughout each. What's more is that each pre-generated character has their own secret agenda dealt out by the GM which changes with each act. This allows for very natural play, and a cranking up of the tension when it's needed.

"In the final act things really start to unravel," says Härenstam, "the idea is that it's fine for characters to die because that's just part of the finale. It's part of the climax of this scenario." In the final stages, these scenarios can be high-conflict free-for-alls that see nearly every aspect of a story resolved, even if that means in a very permanent way for your character "If your character dies, that can be as rewarding in a sense as him or her living on. That's part of the philosophy."

A LONG LIFE ON THE FRONTIER

Game mothers have a lot to do in cinematic play, simply because there is so much going on. While often a roleplaying game is deeply collaborative, here there is a sense of interruption from the GM. It's less that the GM is railroading the story and more that they're encouraged to throw spanners in the air-vents to keep the players on their toes. Campaign play on the other hand is designed to be much more of a slow burn, with a more traditional give and take between players and their GM.

For those that have only seen the films, they may be unaware of the extended *Alien* universe of comic books and videogames. This universe is only hinted at in the main line of *Alien* films. "It's not very clear what's actually canonical" says Härenstam, talking about building this world. This fact has been turned to Free League's advantage in the RPG, where the wildest excesses of the films can be ignored (think *Alien vs Predator*, some of the *Prometheus* silliness, *Resurrection*) and the conflict comes from more human aspects of the setting. In many ways the book ties up some of the loose ends that the canon of the films had left sprayed about like so much acidic xenomorph blood.

> "Characters must be able to die and they should die quite a lot"

"The whole game is set shortly after *Aliens* – the second movie – where there's an escalating conflict between the different colonies of this universe. This is a sort of 'wild west' situation where there are different powers; corporations, but also governments and colonies," says Härenstam "there's an increasing amount of conflict between them. In the campaign mode you really are free to explore these conflicts using that big star map that we have. You can explore the current situation as you see fit, whether you're a colonial marine, an explorer or a space trucker or something else entirely."

The game is set in a specific year, 2183, around four years after the events of *Aliens*. The potential for world building is huge. Small directions to the GM for building worlds in solar systems like "Human presence in a star system will be established on the most lucrative planet, not the most Earth-like," tell you a lot about how this setting remains hostile, but in a much more human way.

For players in this mode, there's likely to be a lot less death, at least, when it comes to player characters. The xenomorph is used differently here, and GMs are advised not to use them all the time. That's one of the reasons that a full range of xenomorph types have been included, allowing for a variance of threat level – and the amount of conflict from the second most dangerous creatures in the *Alien* universe, humans.

"The core system is the same, but a campaign mode doesn't necessarily involve *as* lethal threats. It can, I mean you can run into the worst kinds of horrors – but you can also play missions that don't involve xenomorphs at all." Explains Härenstam, admitting what we might have suspected, "You cannot have xenomorphs in every single planet you go to. I mean, they can, but it will just get, you know, boring." Instead, to keep interest up, they should be teased off-screen, be an adjacent part of the story that gets slowly revealed.

And this is a key challenge facing the team at Free League. How to make an *Alien* game that can be played as a campaign? After all, once you have seen an xenomorph, it can't just go back into its box, egg, or chest. But that's the



beauty of it really. Players are tempted into imagining the worst during campaign play because of knowledge outside of what their characters know. While character knowledge of an xenomorph can take away or soften the feeling of danger if used repeatedly, the lingering threat of knowledge only held by the player can play a part in keeping longer campaigns full of fear.

"It's actually a double-edged sword in a way," says Härenstam, "because also having that knowledge can also increase tension. You don't know exactly what's going to happen, but you know, it's going to be bad because you've seen the movies."

This is balanced with the use of downtime, a mysterious art in the world of roleplaying games. "You'll need to find some downtime between the intense action sequences because you need to relieve the stress and lose those stress dice" says Härenstam. Here, the benefit of reducing your stress dice gives an obvious place to settle between high intensity action that is really desired by players, mechanically. There's a narrative appeal which is also important to the genre, "downtime gives that kind of ebb and flow between horror or action. Downtime with some banter and that – you have to have that, even in cinematic scenarios. In campaign of course you can have longer periods of downtime."

Downtime in campaigns brings us on to the next expansions and cinematic scenarios, both of which are already in the works for *Alien RPG*. The first major supplement to the game covers colonial marines – and includes systems for dealing with downtime, although, it is stressed, that this isn't an update to the core rules, simply a way of adding additional systems into the game.

This expansion is being worked on by Härenstam along with Gaska and Paul Elliot (*HOSTILE*) and promises more lore, gear and to be an "open campaign." This is a sandbox style campaign that provides a plot and a narrative, but with massive scope to deviate from the main through-line of the story. In addition, Gaska is creating a cinematic scenario that in some way follows on from *Chariot of the Gods* – although of course, not with any of the characters from that scenario, for very obvious 'third act' reasons.

We'll have to wait until August 2020 next year to find out more about the fresh horrors waiting for us beyond the Outer Veil. Until then we'll have to settle with making our way through space, and trying not to think about that sound coming from the vents.



ALIEN: THE ROLEPLAYING GAME

The Terror of the Deep (Space)

Designer: Free League

392+ | 15+ | £39



There are plenty of horror games on the market, but few manage to tap into the unsettling, bone-gnawing terror that Alien: The Roleplaying game can conjure up with just a few well-chosen descriptions and careless dice rolls.

From an initial movie about a bunch of space-truckers and their run-in with a single monster through to the expanded timeline of *Prometheus*, the *Alien* universe has always revolved around fear of the unknown; the fear, appropriately enough, of the alien. This isn't the easiest thing to capture at the tabletop, but with a few clever decisions and a stark focus on cranking up the tension the *Alien RPG* does everything it can to summon up feelings of dread, whether you're in a darkened kitchen or a crowded convention hall.

This is achieved with a core ruleset based on the same, simple system used by several other games developed by Free League, including *Tales from the Loop* and *Forbidden Lands*. Skills and stats add dice to a pool, and when you want to try something risky you throw them all and try to get sixes. If you get at least one you succeed, whether that means sneaking past a handful of egg-sacs without rupturing them or clobbering a merc over the head with a wrench.

The biggest twist that *Alien* adds to the system is one that ties the rules neatly into the idea of rising, creeping horror. As characters press themselves or watch their friends be torn apart by monsters, they accumulate an extra pool of stress dice. These dice can generate successes just like their skills and stats – adrenaline pushing them to new heights – but if they roll poorly the terror can overwhelm their character, causing them to freeze, empty their entire magazine or run into the open.

It's a neat little addition to the rules that does a wonderful job of raising the tension, and not just in-game either. Passing checks with just your basic dice pool can be tough, so you're encouraged to push for re-rolls and stress dice right from the start of the adventure, but in the back of everyone's mind lingers the knowledge of what that stress can cause when the real dangers appear.

This isn't the only twist to *Alien*, however. Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the game is that it's actually two games in a single book. Kind of.

One of these is a fairly conventional sci-fi RPG designed for campaigns that might run for weeks or months at a time. The other – known as 'cinematic mode' – is specially built for one-off scenarios. You aren't really expected to ever run a second game using the same characters, because most of them are probably going to be dead.

The rules don't really change between the two, but while campaign mode is where the meat of the details and character options lie, cinematic mode is where strengths of *Alien* shine their brightest. It's here that the terror is at its most accessible, the rules at the slickest and the tone at its darkest.

Some of this can be attributed to the punishing, lethal nature of the pre-written cinematic scenarios, but a lot of the sleek efficiency comes from the careful decision of which rules and ideas to cut out. There's no character creation, no umm-ing and ahh-ing over weapon loadouts and no need to fiddle about with any systems that don't relate directly to the situation at hand. You just turn up, roll your dice and pray that you survive the night.

Of course, this ease of play is balanced out by the sky-high stakes when a campaign game eventually stumbles into a truly deadly threat, but the crew probably won't be facing these every week. For every tense showdown with monstrous aliens, you can probably expect a couple run-ins with pushy Colonial Marines or some corporate drones, and while these can still be fun they aren't exactly the reason why most of us pick up an *Alien* game.

When you're in one-shot cinematic mode, *Alien* is an incredible game. If you have just one night to play and are after some seriously scary roleplaying, it's one of the best choices out there. Campaign mode has the potential to eclipse even this, but if you go down this road you'll need to accept that between the peaks of an excellent horror game lie a few sessions of merely okay sci-fi adventure.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

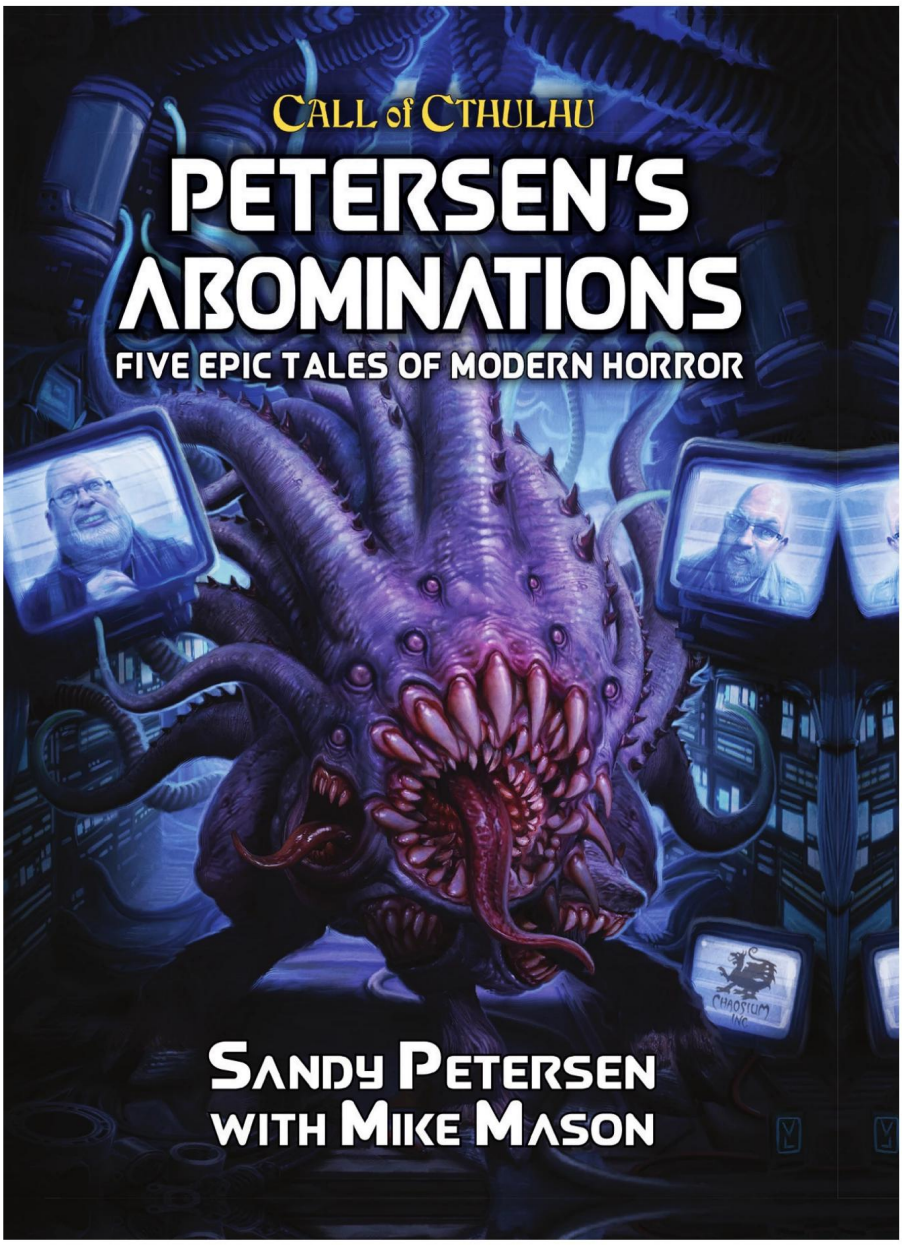
PLAY IT? YES

An incredible horror experience that absolutely excels at one-shot scenarios.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... CALL OF CTHULHU

Though the settings are about as different as you could imagine, *Alien RPG* captures the same despair, dread and pile of dead characters created by classic *Call of Cthulhu* adventures.





CALL OF CTHULHU: PETERSEN'S ABOMINATIONS

Five evenings of horror

Designer: Sandy Petersen, Mike Mason | **Artist:** Various

2+ | £30 | 200

There's a lot to love about one-shot adventures – self-contained, snack-sized selections of gaming that require little in the way of preparation or commitment – and *Petersen's Abominations* showcases an excellent little collection assembled by one of the original driving forces behind *Call of Cthulhu.*

Unlike the traditional 1920s setting that the game usually adopts, the book is firmly rooted in the modern day. This is used to put neat little twists on the usual Lovecraftian tropes and create ghoulish scenarios where biotech firms experiment with foul mutations and gangland bosses look to harness eldritch powers.

There are five such scenarios contained within the book, all of which should be enough to keep a group entertained and horrified in equal measure for a session or two. Indeed, each of them was adapted from a set of scrappy notes that designer Sandy Petersen used to run convention games, and this origin has heavily influenced their structure.

For example, each opens with a neat little contrivance that propels the investigators into the heart of the Lovecraftian mystery within a matter of minutes, such as having a house party they're attending take a turn for the weird when the host breaks out a brand new set of claws. While this can make it tough to work them into an ongoing campaign, it's perfect for the sort of games the book is designed for and gets players invested right out of the blocks.

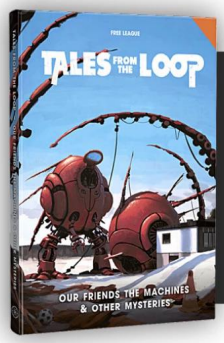
Having said that, though the adventures are fairly short that doesn't mean that they're simple or straightforward. The opening scenario, which involves a gate to Hell opening beneath an isolated hotel, is a particularly complex affair that needs the GM to be incredibly comfortable with the material if the party is going to have a good time.

If you're able to put in the time and effort needed to prepare, however, you'll find that *Petersen's Abominations* is a great way to introduce new players to the world of Lovecraftian horror. Just remember that this is a *Call of Cthulhu* book and retains its traditional degree of deadliness, so you should probably warn them not to get too attached to their characters...

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

Bite-sized investigations, with a creepy modern feel dripping with imagination and blood in equal measure.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TALES FROM THE LOOP: OUR FRIENDS THE MACHINES & OTHER MYSTERIES

One-shots are a great way to explore new systems, though *Petersen's Abominations* is a little less child-friendly and a lot spookier than anything in *Tales from the Loop.*



INTO THE WOODS

Root was 2018's standout board game: a triumph of asymmetrical design, breathtaking presentation and a stirring sylvan world. This year, Mark Truman leads the way deeper into a war-torn woodland with Root: The Roleplaying Game

Words by **Matt Jarvis**



"It's very much this convergence between 'Obviously!' and 'Whoa!' These feelings of surprise and inevitability."

Mark Truman is talking about *Root: The Roleplaying Game*, the upcoming RPG based on last year's phenomenal board game of warring woodland creatures. Designed by Cole Wehrle and brought to life by the gorgeous pastel artwork of illustrator Kyle Ferrin, *Root* handed control of industrialist cats, aristocratic birds, scrappy rodent rebels and a lone raccoon adventurer to players and set them against each other in a battle for supremacy truly red in tooth and claw. Each side operated their animal army in a completely unique way, from the Marquis de Cat's resource-driven expansion across the map to the Eyrie's stringent commitment to an ever-growing list of commands that, if broken, would plunge its hierarchy into turmoil.

Truman first discovered the game almost a year after it was crowdfunded to the tune of more than $600,000 in October 2017. Playing in a hotel bar during the US gaming fair Gen Con with Brendan Conway, who would later join him as a co-designer on *Root: The RPG*, Truman was left stunned.

"I remember Brendan and I kinda looking at each other and being like, 'Wow, this is really something special,'" he recalls. "The combination of the intricacy and asymmetry and the depth of it echoing wargames and counterinsurgency games – COIN games, they're often called – but matched with this really evocative fictional world thanks to Kyle's art and Cole's sort of fiction. We were just blown away from minute one."

As co-founder and CEO of roleplaying studio Magpie Games, responsible for RPGs including the superhero-inspired *Masks* and gritty political fantasy game *Urban Shadows*, Truman saw the potential for *Root*'s setting to become the backdrop to an even wider stage.

"On the eighth or tenth playthrough we were like, 'Y'know, what would be pretty cool here is if we could see more of this world, if we could do more with it," he says.

He reached out to Patrick Leder, head of *Root* publisher Leder Games, who Truman says was immediately interested and excited about the opportunity to explore the game's universe in an RPG.

"Leder Games has always been super supportive of trying to make this a broader world that people can engage with beyond the board game," Truman says. "They have plans for what that looks like beyond *Root*, too."

DIFFERENT SIDES

As Magpie Games began working on *Root: The Roleplaying Game*, Truman and his team pondered how to best bring the board game's distinctive factions of creatures alive.

"We thought of *Root* right off the bat as a game that could speak to the complexities of asymmetric conflict, of having lots of different perspectives, but also it's an adventure game," the designer says.

"When we think about *Root*, one of the things we were most excited about was this is a game in which there's a big war, or a cold war, going on in the background, and you all are playing the adventurers who come to make your fortunes. That immediately leapt out to us as an idea that would give a whole bunch of gamers an opportunity to do what they wanted with *Root* in an exciting way."

To provide players the chance to freely interact with the woodland's varied inhabitants and forge their own path through the trees, the team settled on the Vagabond as the focus of the RPG. In the board game, the Vagabond's solo adventurer – one of several different class-like characters picked by the player – could ally with or antagonise any of the other factions, moving freely between areas of conflict as they gathered items and fulfilled quests. The experience was already that of an RPG-lite, albeit driven by victory points rather than story.

"We're big fans of COIN games and other things that capture that feeling of being the insurgents, being the powers that be. One of the reasons we love thrusting players into that as the Vagabonds is that you end up in the middle of everything. You are the creatures, the fighters, the warriors that are wanted by all sides because you could tilt this battle, this quagmire, one way or another," Truman says of the RPG.

"Part of what we wanted was to give people the option of choosing their faction kind of in the game. You can play any animal as a Vagabond; there's a cat that's a Vagabond in the original game, the Scoundrel. So you can be a cat or a bird or a badger or whatever. There's not a one-to-one correlation in *Root* between the faction and the animals. Even though all the cat meeples are cats, the cats have recruited all kinds of other animals to their army. When they're out there doing recruiting in the woodland, they're not recruiting more cats – the cats come from somewhere else – they're recruiting ordinary mice, bunnies, foxes to their cause. So every faction in *Root* is already kind of a heterodox faction."

Taking control of *Root*'s remaining factions is the RPG's game master, who under the guise of the Marquis de Cat, Eyrie and Woodland Alliance will give players' Vagabonds the chance to co-operate – or clash – with the opposed groups.

"One of the things that we wanted was for people to be able to think through the ideologies of each faction in the game," Truman explains. "So rather than say, 'Okay, you're all cats let's go and do some cat stuff,' and have to really define what 'cat stuff' is, we're going to let the GM represent the cats as a faction – the Marquis de Cat.

"Those factions want things from you; they want you to fight their enemies, they want you to do errands for them, they want you to go seek treasures for them. And as you do so you might become more closely allied with that faction, and at some point even find yourself directly working for them. If you want to protect the woodland, become rebels and join the Woodland Alliance and be the Han Solo of the Woodland Alliance – where you came here to make money but these damn mice just won your heart and now you must fight for them – that's a thing you can do as a Vagabond."

MORE THAN ANIMALS

Part of *Root*'s asymmetrical depiction of its woodland warfare was the way its animal combatants symbolised conflicting ideologies and behaviours, continuing a tradition that stretches from *Animal Farm* to the *Redwall* novels. From industrialist felines to tradition-bound birds, the allegorical gameplay reflected a living, breathing world of differing beliefs and ambitions – all in a few bits of cardboard and wood.

Root: The RPG is able to dig even further into the history and nature of each faction and their place in the forest, with the underlying symbolism giving players' portrayal and perspective of the sylvan setting a huge amount of potential for richer storytelling and worldbuilding. Truman highlights the Lizard Cult introduced in the board game's first expansion – a faction he hopes to explore further in a supplement for the RPG – as a perfect example of *Root*'s ability to go beyond its charming visuals and hand players room for interesting stories.

"I love that they worship the Great Dragon and they're religious fundamentalists and they have their little skulls and they hiss about everything," he says. "That for me as a GM is really exciting: to get to play all those different factions and have them be represented as metaphors for those kinds of people.

"The Eyrie being an aristocratic, above-it-all faction of birds is super fun to play, and it reminds us of what we love about things like *Mouse Guard* – which is an RPG which I've loved for a long time – and of course anything, any movie, any fiction like *The Rescuers Down Under* where the animals are not just animals; they're metaphors for what it feels like to be a mouse in a big world or a fox in a big world."

As in the board game, *Root: The RPG*'s metaphorical layers won't just sit below its cute and cuddly surface. Truman promises that the roleplaying game's systems will bring the individuality of its characters to the fore.

"If you've played any of our games, we're very rarely just like, 'It's a theme!' and wave our hands," he assures. "Everything is always rooted in mechanics."

The roleplaying game will feature tracks similar to the alliance system used by the Vagabond player in the board game. As the group works with – or against – particular factions, the GM will be able to track their standings with certain characters and groups. As their favour or notoriety grows, the players might find eventually themselves confronted by particular situations as the result of their past decisions, in a more concrete and impactful way than other roleplaying games.

"If the cats make an opportunity available to you and you turn them down, then they're going to remember that," Truman explains. "And as you go through the adventures that you have, the cats are going to have a mechanical effect on your options that are available, on their reactions and on some of the fictional setups for the adventures that you have. And eventually they're going to be enemies, right? They're going to put up posters all over the woodland. Y'know: 'REWARD for these Vagabonds!' We think that that's part of the fun. Part of the fun of being a Vagabond is not just making new friends, but having enemies – and those enemies, like Robin Hood-style, trying to catch you and you evading their grasp."

Truman cites Robin Hood as a particular influence on the feel of playing a Vagabond in *Root: The RPG* – as well as acknowledging *Root*'s existing similarities with Disney's animal-filled take on the Sherwood-dwelling outlaw.

"What we definitely think about is that Robin Hood, woodland feel," he says. "We want the Vagabonds to be the lovable scoundrels of the woodland. So we've spent a lot of time thinking through what it takes to give players the ability to play tricks, persuade people to give them what they want, sometimes get in fights but also have a whole plethora of other options for resolving conflicts. So we see that as an opportunity to do what we always do, which is build highly thematic mechanical systems to get across what options players have.

"What we're doing right now is trying to build out a game in that style, in that fashion of: what does it take to produce scoundrel fiction at the table? [...] Are people having an experience at the table that mirrors that sense of playing Robin Hood?"

Although there'll be plenty of opportunity for jaunty woodland adventure and witty interaction with animal characters, Truman is keen that *Root: The RPG* presents players with tougher decisions and potentially darker implications as the result of their Vagabonds' mercenary ways.

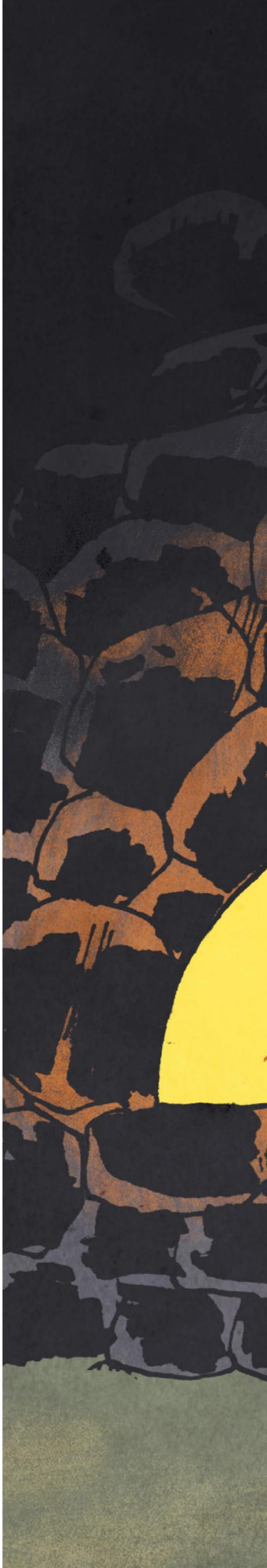
"One of the parts of that is we also feel that there's a strong *Game of Thrones*-style influence here as well, where you could also play the Hound," he compares. "You could also play a Vagabond who works for the cats and you're wrestling with the moral challenges of working for the 'villains', but who might be making the woodland a better place, maybe? There's some questions there about whether you're on the right side.

"We don't want it to just be light scoundrel fun – we also love the idea that you roll into town and the local people have things they want you to do, but those things are in direct opposition to what your allies want to have happen. And you as a group of Vagabonds have to choose: who are we really working for? And if we want fame and fortune, are we willing to go our own way and perhaps earn the enmity of everybody – of all the different factions! – to be our own Vagabonds? 'No cats, no masters,' right? That's sort of the core moral challenge we want to put into the game.

"All the systems we're building are trying to give the Vagabonds the option of being very powerful, very exciting – have a lot of agency as players but also be confronted with touch choices about what the woodland's going to look like when they're done."

AWAY FROM THE ROOTS

While Truman vows that *Root: The Roleplaying Game* will be faithful to the board game's world and characters, he says that the experience of actually playing the RPG will feel significantly different for fans.









"It's usually a bad idea to try and parallel mechanics, because the way that a board game functions – it's limited, it's constrained, it's focused – is just fundamentally different from how a roleplaying game functions," he explains. "But we're certainly looking at those elements to capture their feeling."

He gives the example of the Arbiter, one of the possible Vagabond classes, who can serve as an extra defender for another faction during combat in the board game.

"That doesn't really transfer to a roleplaying game, 'cause you're supposed to be the actor, right? This is happening on someone else's turn. So we've actually looked at giving the Arbiter a special ability to basically say, 'Thou shall not pass.' The Arbiter's cool thing is they can hold an area – a bridge, a door – and no-one can get through it. It gives you that sense of, 'Yeah, I matter to this fight! I was the one who held them off,' but in a different mechanical way."

Another possible character type is the Tinker. Like the Arbiter, the class opens up a different approach to encounters and situations – this time, by building and using mechanical objects.

"Other Vagabonds might try to do that or learn to do that over time, but the Tinker's going to have options that no other character has," Truman explains.

"This game is going to look a lot like *Dungeon World*, *Masks*, other places we've worked in, where players get a playbook or a character type that gives them unique ways to engage with the setting. So it's a little asymmetric."

Playing just as important a role in the RPG as it did in the board game is the Vagabonds' gear and equipment, which opened up additional actions and abilities in the original *Root* as it was collected from the forest.

"Whether you have a crossbow, whether you have a hammer, matters a lot," Truman says. "We want that to be true about the tabletop RPG, too; but we want it to be true in a storytelling way, not necessarily 'And now I do plus-two damage against cats with my crossbow.'"

The aim is, Truman adds, to give the players the power to make their characters – and the world – their own, going beyond the relatively rigid gameplay of a board game to bring *Root*'s setting fully alive.

"As they have adventures, the way that the mechanics play out is that they have options for moving forward that aren't just fighting every group of cats they come across but engaging in the kind of delightful trickery-slash-persuasion-slash-sneaking around that kind of typifies woodland scoundrel fiction," he explains.

Several of Magpie Games' previous RPGs have been built on Powered by the Apocalypse, the flexible and straightforward roleplaying engine used in other games such as *Apocalypse World* and *Monsterhearts* that defines characters' actions as 'moves' resolved by two six-sided dice and modifiers. Truman confirms that *Root: The RPG* will likely follow a similar structure.

"We're still playing around with exactly what this system looks like, but one of the reasons we love that system in particular is that it's not a hard-coded system of, 'Oh, you definitely have these moves, these playbooks, these things' – it's a framework for thinking about roleplaying games," he says. "So if you've tried *Dungeon World*, *Monster of the Week*, *Masks* or *Urban Shadows*, they're very, very different games."

Truman is confident the solid roleplaying foundation and fleshed-out setting of *Root: The RPG* will satisfy roleplaying veterans looking for a vast new world to venture into. But just as important as proving the game could live up to the second half of its name was ensuring those attracted by its familiar title wouldn't find themselves lost in the woods.

> "I want this to be a game people are playing ten years from now – that is a big challenge."



"There's got to be a lot of people for whom this is going to be their first RPG," the designer predicts. "We're thinking about that in terms of the mechanics that are being developed, in terms of the book that we're outlining and starting to write. We're already thinking about: how can someone who's never played an RPG before have this be their first game and have a blast with their friends? Or maybe you played *Root* last week as a board game and this week you've convinced that same group of four or five people to give it a shot as a tabletop roleplaying game. The game has to work for those folks.

"We want to move away from gaming as spreadsheets, as 'Here is this thing you have to absorb and understand before we can even start playing,' to gaming, tabletop roleplaying, as a storytelling experience with you and your friends. That doesn't mean we want to make a mechanically light game."

FOREST FOR THE TREES

With a background as ripe for roleplaying potential as the world of *Root*, Truman admits it's easy to get carried away with ideas.

"One of the challenges of publishing is you say, 'We're going to do these things!' and then, like, three years later everything finally comes out," he says. "The first thing we want to do is make an absolutely fantastic core game. I want this to be a game people are playing ten years from now, and that is a big challenge. It's a big challenge to make a game that people really pick up and run with and have a great time with. So that's our first thing, and if we do nothing but that I will feel like we've done *Root* right."

That doesn't mean the designer doesn't have a wish list of plans for *Root: The RPG*, of course. The game's core rulebook will focus on the four factions from the original board game: the Marquis de Cat, Woodland Alliance, Eyrie and Vagabond.

"We want to give people a sense of really how to play the cats and the birds and the Woodland Alliance in a concrete solid way first," Truman says. "That gives us the option of bringing [other] factions in in a real way once we've built a system that really supports the core game."

Beyond that, supplements and expansions will bring more options to the table for both players and the GM, as well as exploring new types of adventures for characters to embark on – and bringing fresh voices to *Root*'s political commentary.

"What we like about *Root* is the way that all the factions are positioned in tension with each other," Truman says. "So the Woodland Alliance looks great, it looks like they're the good guys. But they're also distinct from the other creatures of the woodland; they're a rebel faction. There are many creatures in the woodland who don't necessarily support them. So we don't want to ever have a situation in which we're saying, 'Well, these are the good guys and these are the bad guys and that's it, we're done.' Instead we see every supplement as a way of delving deeper into what the game has to offer.

"A lot of what we're going to do is build and support the world that Leder Games puts out with mechanics and advice and systems that allow people to take whatever Leder Games is doing and go deeper with it. So when the Riverfolk Company and Lizard Cult are introduced to your board game, you're like, 'This is cool, these have totally new perspectives.' But when they're introduced to your roleplaying game, suddenly you have these disaster capitalists and religious fundamentalists – how will your Vagabonds deal with the challenges they pose and the opportunities they offer? Because before the otters come to town, being straight mercenaries isn't really a thing – you're picking a side. But the Riverfolk Company, they just want to pay you money – and how will you react when you're offered a big sack of gold to deal with problems instead of the promises that birds and cats always make for future loyalty?"

Truman expresses his hope to bring all of the board game's additional factions to the RPG, including the Great Underground Duchy of moles and the Corvid Conspiracy – a murder of crows who excel in espionage – introduced in this year's upcoming *Underworld* expansion.

"Those new factions, we look at them and we're like, 'Oh, those are so cool!' but we're not going to get to them until like 2021," he laughs. "We move a lot slower in some ways because we have the obligation of writing tens of thousands of words to get a book out the door."

With the border of *Root*'s woodland world set to grow further in both the board game and RPG, Truman says that keeping players in command of the setting's story will remain central.

"Leder Games has always been committed to Root as a playground more than a set story," he explains. "The idea is we're working to support their development of new factions and new ideas for the setting, but we're really unlikely to say, 'And then the cats win and book four is where you must fight…'"

With a crowdfunding campaign on Kickstarter this year ahead of a planned release next spring, Truman diplomatically comments that the *Root: The RPG* team is taking the right amount of "extra time" to ensure that the roleplaying game is exactly what fans hope for.

"There's a lot of precision that sometimes we might go out there and try a thing and not care too much if it works, but we're putting a lot of time and energy into making sure that what Leder Games is doing is a thing we're supporting and that we're clear about what their future vision is for the product," he says. "So there's these kind of pulls here. On one hand, it's really clear, it's really easy for us to write to what this game is about and we're so excited about what this game is about. On the other hand, we have to move a little bit more cautiously; we have to take our time and make sure all our ducks are in a row before we say, 'Oh, it's definitely going to be this kind of game,' or 'It's definitely coming out on this date!'"

But even he can't contain his own excitement at the potential to venture deeper into one of gaming's most engrossing and breathtaking worlds.

"Our main thing right now is making sure that people are really clear that this isn't going to happen in five years from now; it's happening now."







THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

FIGHTING TALK

A few sentences can give your world the delicious splash of flavour needed to bring it to life in the minds of your players. But what should you say? And how do you make sure it's brevity rather than blathering? Here are a few choice words…

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast**

Ahab Stormbringer wasn't a particularly traditional cleric. His backstory was packed with dark deeds on stormy seas, and when he strode into battle he did so with a jagged cutlass clutched between his teeth and a tiny draconic familiar perched on his shoulder.

One of the things that his comrades always remembered – alongside his tirade of nautical puns, of course – was the way that he used his divine magic. For example, when he laid a gnarled and weather-beaten hand on his foes their body wasn't simply wracked by radiant light or even a dark warping of the soul. No, when he cast his favourite spell their limbs were suddenly worn and warped as though they had spent years soaking in the salty depths, torn by countless waves and tides. They shrivelled back before him with rusted armour and rotten rags where their clothes once stood.

Even when he healed his friends and allies the spell shook them with the feeling of a

sudden dip in the frozen seas where he had once plied his trade that left them gasping; an effective move, but not a particularly pleasant one…

The mechanical effect of all this was – of course – zero. His withering spell still dealt 3d10 damage, and the plunge-pool healing was identical to the somewhat softer ministrations of the druid. But it all went to remind his allies – and the people playing them – that while Ahab and his sea goddess were powerful and generous allies, they weren't exactly *nice*.

And that's why a little bit of mid-combat flair can help to build a character.

BOUNCING OFF THE RULES

Rules are an important part of tabletop RPGs – indeed, there are plenty of systems out there that aren't really anything but rulesets with a little bit of guidance tacked on for good measure – and this goes double when it comes to combat.

Where many games play it fairly loose when it comes to social interactions or exploration, and while there's often room for a little bit of 'rule of cool' to bend things here and there, combat is the point where everything becomes much more codified. The rules say that you can only move so far, make so many attacks and cast so many spells at a time, no matter how cool it would be if you took out the entire army of foes single-handed.

This is all part of creating a fair and balanced game that isn't too unwieldy, of course, but this sudden shift to cast-iron mechanics can sometimes reduce combat – often the focus of a session – to a game of numbers and dice rather than a tense confrontation between brave adventurers and foul monsters.

At one time or another, every GM out there has fallen into the trap of having a battle shift into pure mechanics. Players quote attack values and damage, we deduct health and call for rolls. And, suddenly, the exciting duel with the rogue's long-lost brother atop a burning castle has been reduced to something with the emotional weight of chopping wood for the fire.

SIZZLE AND SORCERY

Narrating combat can be tricky, there's no doubt about that. After all, there are only so many ways you can say "You swing your sword" without reaching for the more obscure parts of a thesaurus – and adding a lengthy passage for every ebb and flow of a battle can kill the pacing stone dead.

What can help, however, is trying to view every battle as an opportunity to build the world, as useful as any conversation or paragraph of read-out text.

Do the town guards fight as a slick, cohesive unit, or do they bumble about as though plucked from an especially violent Laurel and Hardy sketch? What does that say about the training they had and how much tough the city is on foolhardy adventurers who flout the law within its walls?

Likewise, how do the weird, black-scaled aliens react when one of their number is cut down by an errant laser beam? What does it mean if they react with berserk fury, or if the seemingly monstrous foes show sorrow or dread at the loss of an ally?

Every blow or exchange of fire needn't come with its own unique novella but, even then, it's always good to keep players aware of the fact that the cultist hasn't used the attack action – they've taken a wild swing with a rusted dagger, hissing a scattershot prayer of devotion to their mad god as they do so.

> "Try to view every battle as an opportunity to build the world, as useful as any conversation or paragraph of read-out text."

Even the purely tactical, mechanical abilities that the creatures under the GM's control use can alter how they feel and the stories they tell.

One of the best examples of building character through deeds rather than words came in a campaign many years ago, when the party's wizard managed to successfully counterspell the villainous archmage's fireball early on in the encounter. The arrogant old mage took this as a personal insult and tore his carefully-crafted plan to shreds in a bid to take vengeance on the young upstart who dared challenge his might.

By the end of the battle the heroes had won a resounding victory and halted the diabolical ritual before it could cause real harm, but at the cost of their own wizard's life. The sneaky spellcaster had done the traditional villain thing and teleported back to a secretive lair after realising the danger he faced, but by then he had established himself as one of the most hated foes the party ever encountered, all through his deeds in combat.

MANY HANDS

There are more people involved in an RPG than just the GM, of course, and keeping the narrative flowing through combat isn't just one person's responsibility. The players themselves should also see their various battles as a chance to tell a story and build on character moments.

In many ways this can be even harder for players than GMs. While it may get tricky to add a bit of panache to the orcs' spear thrusts after five rounds of combat, at least you'll get to try it again with dryads or kobolds the next week. The knight, on the other hand, will still be swinging her familiar sword and blocking with her familiar shield.

Despite this, there are still ways to inject moments of drama into every fight. This could mean roleplaying out the horror that consumes an investigator when an alien being slithers from the shadows, or simply narrating the grateful nod that passes between the ranger and cleric after a healing spell seals up a gash in their leg.

Asking the players to describe the way in which they dispatch an enemy that just hit zero hit points is a particularly great way to let their – occasionally slightly disturbing – imaginations run wild without fear of unbalancing things.

While most of us would place limits on the damage that the heroes can inflict on an enemy that's still fighting, as allowing them to pluck out eyes or sever limbs on their first blow would run a little counter to the rules, there are no such restrictions on fallen foes. There's a good reason why the "How do you want to do this?" catchphrase from *Critical Role's* Matt Mercer has caught on so successfully.

Ultimately, keeping the narrative up during discussions of rules and mechanics is a tricky task to handle. There's certainly no shame in realising that your table has fallen out of it after a long night of rolling dice and looking up rulings on grappling for the fifth time in as many sessions, but it's important that you're able to recognise when it happens – and to have some idea of how best to drag things back towards the realm of 'roleplaying', and not just 'gaming'.

BOARD RUN

The first roleplaying game set in the world of Android: Netrunner will put you right at the centre of New Angeles' cyberpunk dystopia. Step into the Shadow of the Beanstalk

Words by **Matt Jarvis**

Android: Netrunner is dead, long live *Android*.

When Fantasy Flight announced last summer that its living card game reboot of Richard Garfield's '90s CCG *Netrunner* would be coming to an end after six years, the news was unsurprisingly received with an amount of shock and disappointment among fans. Disappointment that one of – if not *the* – most acclaimed competitive tabletop games ever made was being cut off in its prime, combined with the surprise of the timing mere months after the game had been updated with a revised core set and long-awaited rotation for tournament play.

Even those working on the game seemed surprised at the decision of Wizards of the Coast – the *Magic: The Gathering* maker that owns the rights to the original *Netrunner* – not to renew the licence it had granted to Fantasy Flight to work on *Android: Netrunner*.

"It seems like the timing couldn't be worse to announce the end of the game line," studio head Andrew Navaro wrote in a blog post at the time, while lead developer Michael Boggs described his own "mix of sadness, confusion and nostalgia" at being told the game was to be brought to a close.

Both designers added their hope that *Netrunner*'s passionate community would keep the game alive after its final expansion, *Reign and Reverie*, wrapped up its impressive six-year run.

"I hope and believe the community will keep it alive for years to come," said Boggs.

"Just because we won't be printing it anymore doesn't suddenly turn it into a game that's not worth playing," Navaro added, pointing out the continued popularity of the original *Netrunner* among fans long after it too had stopped being updated: "Their patience and dedication were eventually rewarded by the resurrection of the game they loved.

"Personally, I hold out hope that one day *Netrunner* will return, and that our part in its history will be regarded as a significant chapter of its much longer journey."

TAKE BACK CTRL

While *Android: Netrunner*'s fate had been sealed, buried amongst the bittersweet reminiscences lay a flicker of hope for the future of the wider *Android* universe – the futuristic setting Fantasy Flight had relocated its reboot of the card game to in place of *Netrunner*'s origins in the world of '80s tabletop RPG *Cyberpunk 2020*.

"While *Android: Netrunner* is coming to an end, the worlds of *Android* will continue to be explored, from the gritty streets of SanSan to the warring colonies of Mars," Fantasy Flight vowed.

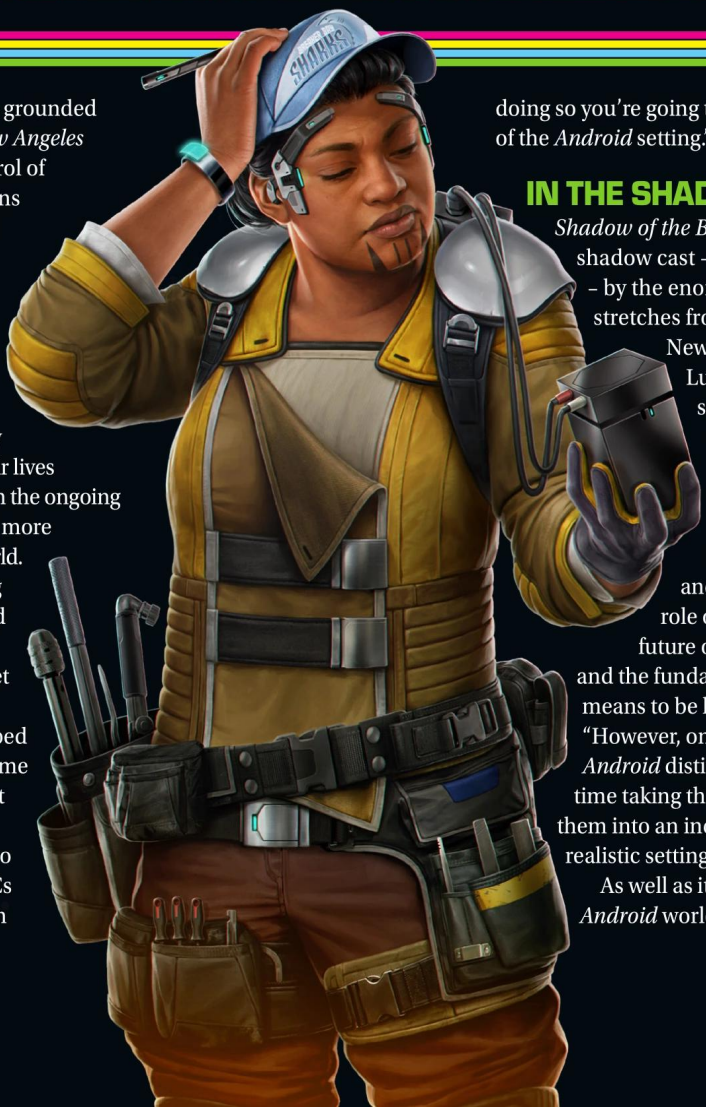
The next journey into the cyberpunk world would turn out to be the deepest exploration of the *Android* universe yet. *Shadow of the Beanstalk* is the first roleplaying sourcebook to take place in the setting, giving players the chance to live out their adventures in both the near-future real world depicted in murder-mystery series starting point *Android* and its follow-up board games *New Angeles* and *Android: Infiltration*, and the *Matrix*-like virtual space known as the Network that served as the battlefield for *Netrunner* and cyber bank heist *Android: Mainframe*. Where those games each focused on just one slice of the connected world, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* brings all of the parts of the universe together for a closer look at its technological and social strata than ever before.

"Up until now, you've seen *Android* in either a big-picture view – the *Worlds of Android* [book] and the *Android* and *New Angeles* board games – or through a lens that's very focused on the Network: *Android: Netrunner*," says developer Samuel Gregor-Stewart. "In the board games, you're flying over New Angeles at a very high level – quite literally in some cases – then swooping down to have specific interactions."

Shadow of the Beanstalk is the most intimate look at *Android*'s cyberpunk universe to date







The RPG also gives players their most grounded experience of the fictional future. In *New Angeles* and *Netrunner*, players would take control of the executives of major megacorporations overseeing their business empire or the rebellious hackers known as 'runners' attempting to bring them down by infiltrating their computer systems. Rather than high-powered billionaires or computer-whizz revolutionaries, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* places players in the shoes of normal people (at least, by the standards of the future) living out their lives from day to day before they're swept up in the ongoing social struggle, revealing the darker and more dangerous underbelly of the high-tech world.

"These are fairly regular people trying to get by and even just survive in a world full of powerful forces that don't really care what happens to the people who get caught between them," Gregor-Stewart says. "So when your characters get trapped between a vicious battle between orgcrime outfits, rival corporations or in the midst of a sinister government cover-up, they only have themselves and their friends to rely on. It's up to you and your fellow PCs to make it out the other side alive, and in doing so you're going to see the grimy, street-level view of the *Android* setting."

IN THE SHADOW

Shadow of the Beanstalk's title references the shadow cast – metaphorically and literally – by the enormous space elevator that stretches from the sprawling metropolis of New Angeles on Earth to the moon, Luna. The symbolism sets the stage for *Android*'s exploration of subjects as central to sci-fi as robots and cyberspace.

"*Android* does pull from some of the most storied and interesting themes of cyberpunk and science-fiction, such as the role of corporations in society, a future of augmented and virtual reality, and the fundamental question of what it means to be human," says Gregor-Stewart. "However, one of the things that makes *Android* distinctive is how it spends so much time taking those questions and weaving them into an incredibly interesting, vibrant and realistic setting."

As well as its social commentary, the *Android* world has plenty of the more flashy



> “Android is a great roleplaying setting because it feels wild and fantastical, but has that touch of familiarity.”

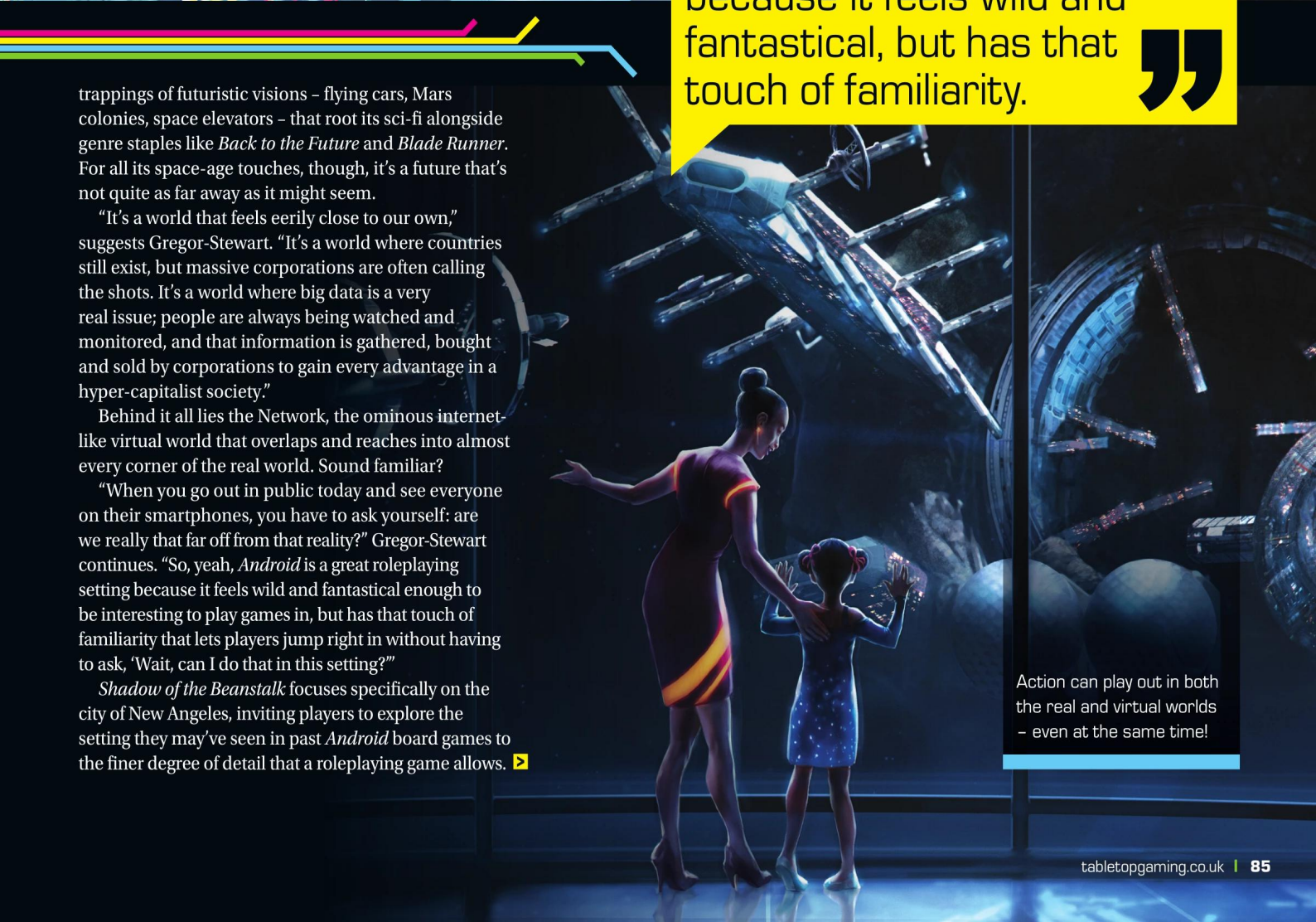
trappings of futuristic visions – flying cars, Mars colonies, space elevators – that root its sci-fi alongside genre staples like *Back to the Future* and *Blade Runner*. For all its space-age touches, though, it's a future that's not quite as far away as it might seem.

“It's a world that feels eerily close to our own,” suggests Gregor-Stewart. “It's a world where countries still exist, but massive corporations are often calling the shots. It's a world where big data is a very real issue; people are always being watched and monitored, and that information is gathered, bought and sold by corporations to gain every advantage in a hyper-capitalist society.”

Behind it all lies the Network, the ominous internet-like virtual world that overlaps and reaches into almost every corner of the real world. Sound familiar?

“When you go out in public today and see everyone on their smartphones, you have to ask yourself: are we really that far off from that reality?” Gregor-Stewart continues. “So, yeah, *Android* is a great roleplaying setting because it feels wild and fantastical enough to be interesting to play games in, but has that touch of familiarity that lets players jump right in without having to ask, ‘Wait, can I do that in this setting?’”

Shadow of the Beanstalk focuses specifically on the city of New Angeles, inviting players to explore the setting they may've seen in past *Android* board games to the finer degree of detail that a roleplaying game allows.



Action can play out in both the real and virtual worlds – even at the same time!

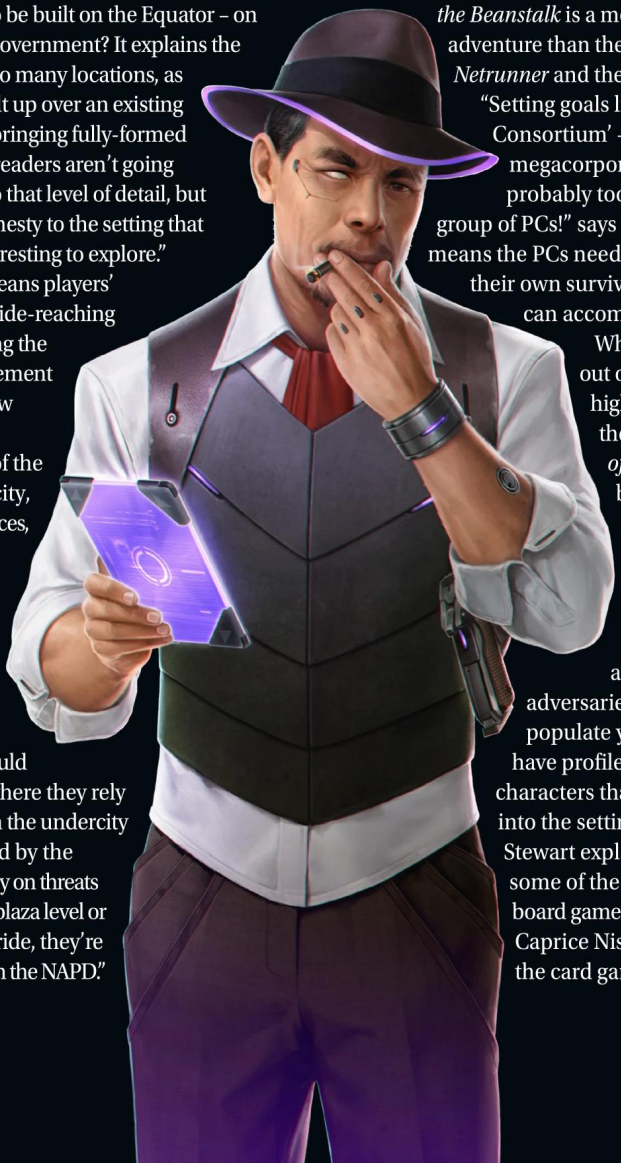


Like a lot of sci-fi, the world of *Android* is ripe with commentary on society and technology

"A lot of the city's elements have been thought out and designed," Gregor-Stewart says. "For example, did you know that New Angeles is actually in Ecuador – space elevators need to be built on the Equator – on land leased by the US government? It explains the Ecuadoran names for so many locations, as if the city had been built up over an existing landscape instead of springing fully-formed from some void. Most readers aren't going to delve too deeply into that level of detail, but it gives a depth and honesty to the setting that makes it especially interesting to explore."

The urban setting means players' encounters can have wide-reaching repercussions, attracting the attention of law enforcement – or denizens of the New Angeles underworld.

"Because so much of the game takes place in a city, actions have consequences, and GMs should take that into account," Gregor-Stewart advises. "There are plenty of places where the PCs are going to need to get out their guns and fight to survive, but they should be careful when and where they rely on violence. Fighting in the undercity won't get them noticed by the authorities, but if they rely on threats to rob a shop owner on plaza level or steal a hopper for a joyride, they're going to have to deal with the NAPD."



The down-to-earth nature of players' characters and their unwilling (at least, to begin with) involvement in the machinations of the world means that *Shadow of the Beanstalk* is a more personal, intimate adventure than the grander stories of *Netrunner* and the other *Android* games.

"Setting goals like 'destroy the Weyland Consortium' – one of the biggest megacorporations on the planet – is probably too ambitious even for a group of PCs!" says Gregor-Stewart. "That means the PCs need to think smart, ensure their own survival and pick goals that they can accomplish."

While their stories may play out on a different scale to the high-level drama of the rest of the *Android* series, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* players will be able to interact with characters from across the games who pop up in their campaigns.

"One fun element is that while we have an extensive chapter of adversaries and allies that can populate your game, we also have profiles for some of the major characters that have been introduced into the setting over the years," Gregor-Stewart explains. "These range from some of the original characters in the board game like Rachel Beckmann and Caprice Nisei, to popular additions to the card game like Kati Jones."





GENESYS GENESIS

Shadow of the Beanstalk's gameplay is built on *Genesys*, Fantasy Flight's setting-less roleplaying system that previously explored the fantasy realms of *Runewars* world *Terrinoth* in another sourcebook. The deliberately generic ruleset at its foundation means that the *Android* book bridges the divide between the roleplaying and board game experiences.

"The rules are simple enough that *Android* fans who've never played an RPG before can pick them up quickly and, when we have created rule adaptations for the *Android* setting, the new rules work within the basic *Genesys* framework, so people with RPG experience who play *Shadow of the Beanstalk* are going to have a much easier time grasping them," Gregor-Stewart insists.

While *Genesys*' flexible nature already supports player-created sci-fi settings, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* introduces elements tailored to *Android*'s distinctive take on the internal and external turmoil its characters face.

"The *Android* setting is a world with mystery, drama and a healthy dose of action," says Gregor-Stewart. "Roleplaying games set in the *Android* universe are going to have exciting action scenes and dramatic, powerful social encounters, and *Genesys* handles both very well. In addition, the *Android* setting has always had emotional and mental 'baggage' play a role for its major characters – in fact, it was a major mechanic in the original *Android* board game – and *Genesys* represents that well by giving each major character four positive and negative motivations that help drive their actions."

Genesys' character creation as a whole has been expanded to suit the wide diversity of roles and backgrounds characters living in the *Android* universe can have, with new careers and character archetypes added to the RPG's core rules for bringing characters to life.

"We needed to do that so that the characters felt like inhabitants in the *Android* universe," Gregor-Stewart says. "So instead of various types of humans, you get bioroids, clones, G-mods, cyborgs, naturals and Loonies, and the careers are similarly flavoured to fit into the careers one might pursue in *Android*.

Gregor-Stewart's own choice pick for his cyberpunk avatar?

"The Roughneck, who's basically a space construction worker who spends their days up Stalk building orbital facilities and their nights in the bars of Base De Cayambe, but also has a degree in engineering and another in physics."

Adding extra flavour to characters' stories is a new gameplay aspect called the favour economy, which gives newly-made characters a boost of money or experience points – at a cost. The helping hand comes from one of New Angeles' many factions, from cloning corporation Jinteki to AI and android specialist Haas-Bioroid. Even the police can be involved. These 'generous' helpers can come calling for the favour that players' owe them in return at any point in the future, making the initial starting boost a risky deal to strike. Gregor-Stewart says the favour economy gives *Shadow of the Beanstalk* the "street level" style its creators were trying to achieve, as well as lending players plenty of inspiration for adventures.

"In the New Angeles undercity, 'you owe me one' is often worth more than a few hundred credits, and surviving and thriving beneath plaza level is often a matter of whom you can call on for help, and what you're ready to do in return," he says. "Plus, having characters owe favours is a great way for the GM to pull them into adventures. It's basically an in-built plot hook that most characters start with."

Shadow of the Beanstalk wouldn't be a true *Android* game without the underlying presence of the Network, and the virtual capers that take place in its digital world. *Genesys* already featured rules for hacking, but to properly bring the experience of virtual infiltration in *Shadow of the Beanstalk* closer to the tense runner-versus-megacorp showdown of *Android: Netrunner*, its creators faced a significant hurdle.

"The biggest design challenge was definitely adapting the hacking rules from the *Genesys* core rulebook and making them feel appropriate to the experience of running in games like *Netrunner*," Gregor-Stewart says. "We always knew we could do it, but we wanted to put the work in to make sure it really did feel 'right' to fans of the card game who may not have had as much experience with *Genesys* or RPGs in general."

Building on *Genesys*' use of structured encounters to let players split simultaneous action across multiple environments, and with its more immersive depiction of hacking, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* lets players tackle their real-world and virtual opponents at once. This 'universal action' system sets the scene for some cinematic moments: a runner could be breaking into a megacorp server on the Network while their companions stealthily dispatch the guards patrolling the hallways, maybe. Or a member of the gang could be racing against time trying to hack open a sealed door while the rest engage in a firefight with waves of security forces – even in a completely different place. Gregor-Stewart says the ability to comfortably blend wildly different activities and environments across the digital and real worlds made *Genesys* the ideal starting point for an *Android* RPG.

"That's one of the reasons *Genesys* was such a great fit for a roleplaying game set in the Android universe!"

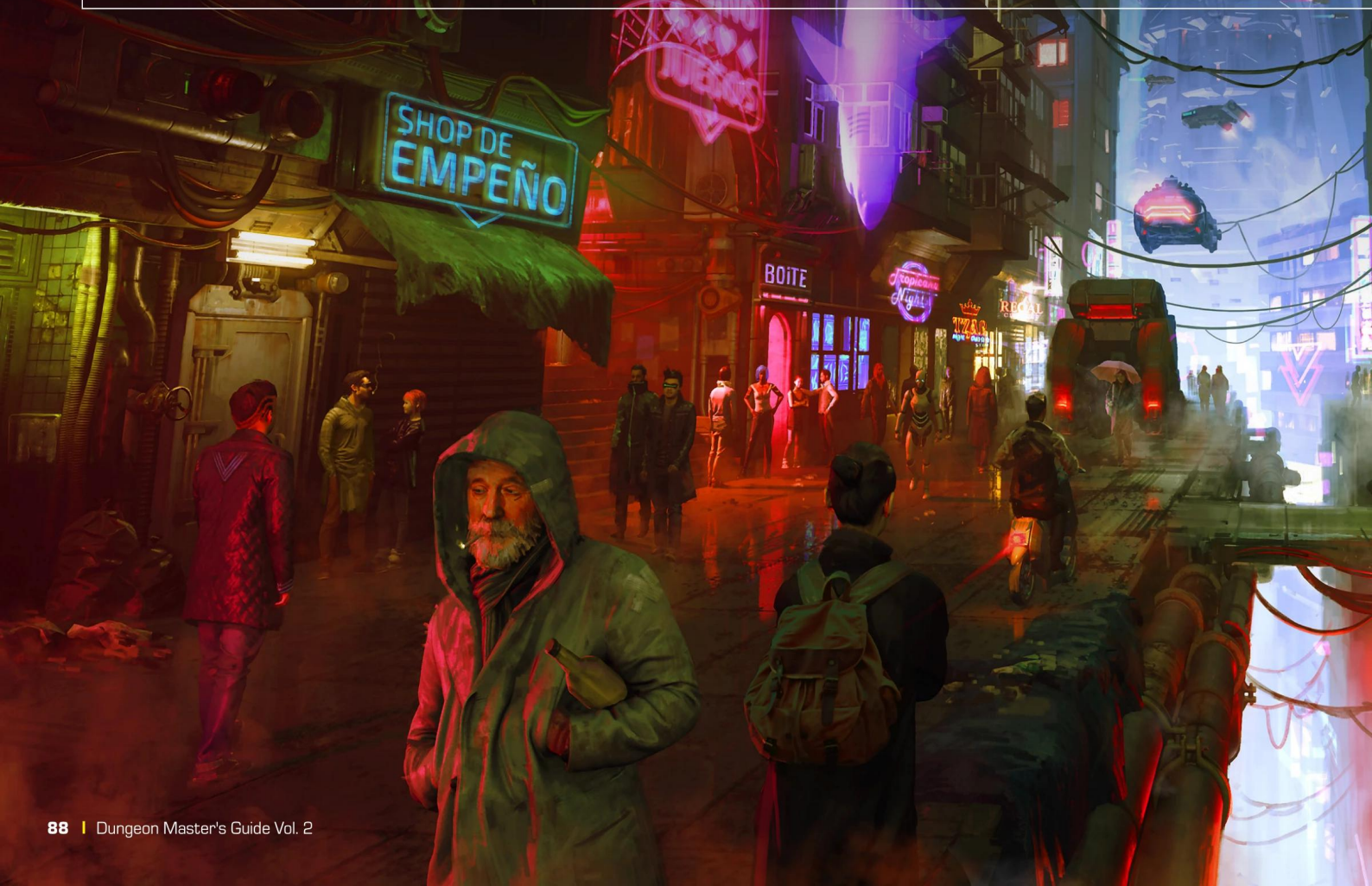
KEEP ON RUNNIN'

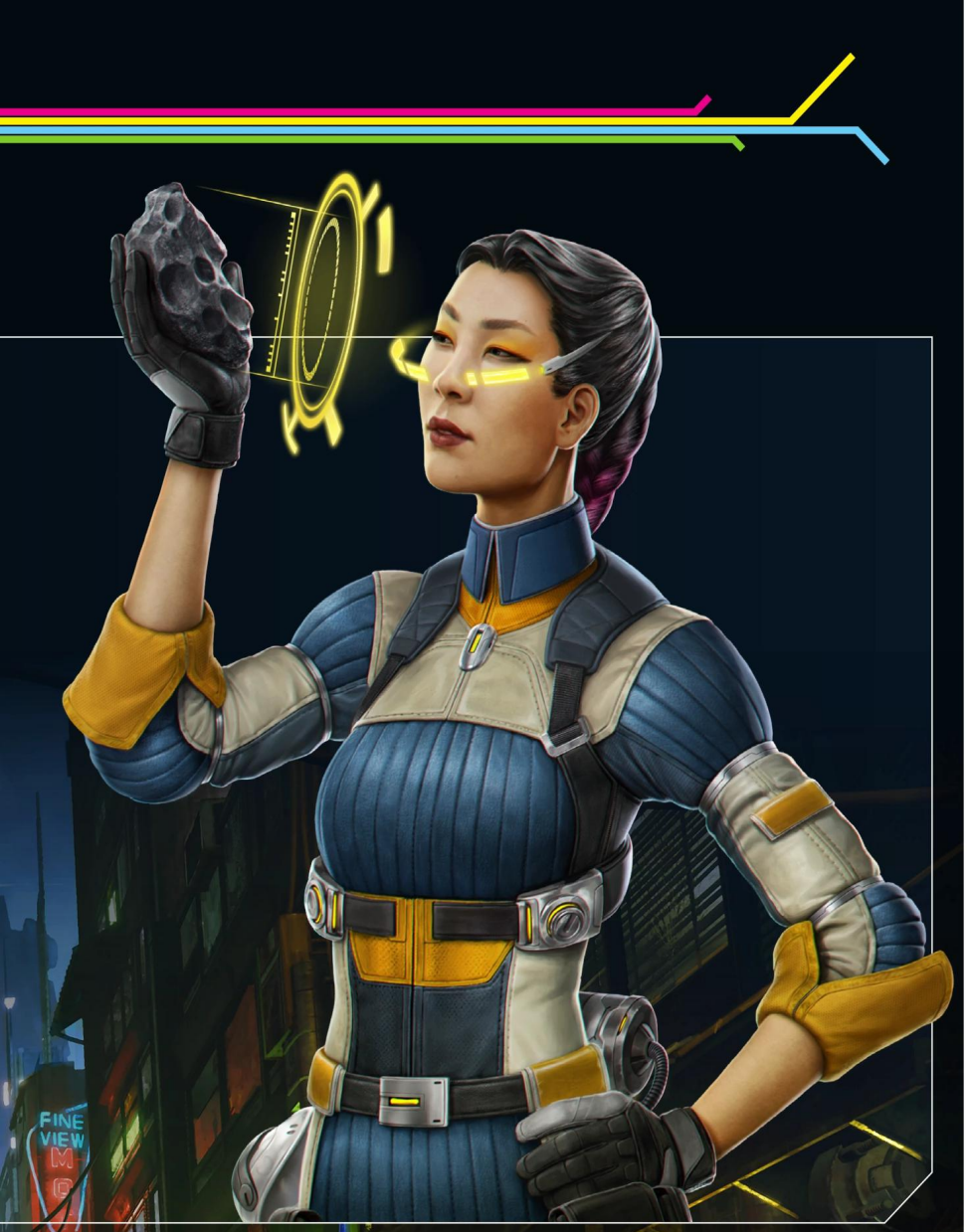
Shadow of the Beanstalk won't replace the loss of *Netrunner*, but it will give those craving a deeper look into the world of *Android* a unique and more intimate perspective of the universe they adore.

"*Android: Netrunner* was something extraordinary," Michael Boggs wrote in his farewell to the living card game. "It was unique in its theme and mechanics, sure, but its true specialty came from the people around it."

By handing authorship of a universe full of corners left unexplored to players, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* has the potential to become just as special as *Netrunner* to the next wave of those absorbed by the *Android* world – and let those longing to continue their adventures in the Network a story without end.

The character creation of *Genesys* has been expanded to suit the inhabitants of New Angeles







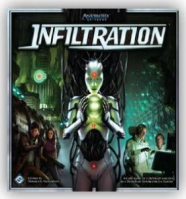
JACKING IN

First time in New Angeles? Let us get you up to speed, kid



ANDROID (2008)

The board game that birthed the *Android* universe follows players' detectives as they scour New Angeles and the lunar colony of Heinlein in search of leads in a murder mystery. Meanwhile, their own troubled backgrounds and inner torments present just as much to deal with as the unfolding conspiracy around them.



ANDROID: INFILTRATION (2012)

Cyber-crime is rampant in this card game, with players' thieves racing to steal secrets from the secure (or so they thought) facilities of megacorp CyberSolutions. The thieves must avoid security, outmanoeuvre their rival robbers and explore the complex as they hunt and download the valuable data.



ANDROID: NETRUNNER (2012)

The big one. The now-dead living card game pitted megacorp and hacking runner head-to-head in a battle to take down their opponent through digital warfare. The runner bypasses security measures to steal – or destroy – assets, racing against the growing might of the company as it advances its agendas and fortifies its servers. With each side having different objectives and abilities, and the ability to customise their deck to suit their own play style, it's an asymmetric experience like no other. Even with its official discontinuation, sets can be found online – though a full collection may set you back.



ANDROID: MAINFRAME (2016)

A very different take on running to *Netrunner*, *Mainframe* is a board-based battle between cyberspace criminals in a race to rob a bank. The heist plays out in the Network, with players establishing access points and executing programs to find their way through the security and take control of valuable accounts.



NEW ANGELES (2016)

Set in the sprawling city that gives it its name, *New Angeles* swaps players' perspective from the runners rebelling against the megacorps to the executives of the corporate powerhouses themselves. In this world of business, money and influence give way to more money and influence – but alliances with your fellow companies is only worthwhile while you stand to gain. Meanwhile, the streets of the city need cleaning up – even if it might take some dirty dealing to get there.

GENESYS: SHADOW OF THE BEANSTALK

Jacking back into the world of Android



Designer: Fantasy Flight Games team | **Artist:** Various

From computer-hacking to bio-modification, *Shadow of the Beanstalk* has everything you need to launch your *Genesys* game into the neon-lit streets of the cyberpunk genre – though the smorgasbord of tropes does give the setting itself a distinctly generic feeling, this may not actually be a bad thing.

Like the previous *Genesys* sourcebook to hit shelves, *Realms of Terrinoth, Shadow of the Beanstalk* is designed to get players exploring a world first seen in other Fantasy Flight games. In this case it's the corporate-dominated near-future that's home to both the *Android* board game and the recently-defunct *Android: Netrunner* living card game.

This is a world that neatly ticks every cyberpunk cliché going. Corporate giants grow clones for menial jobs, street toughs with luminous hair jack into vast oceans of data and the streets are awash with designer drugs with achingly sci-fi names like Pixel or Sting. At the very centre of it all stands the titular Beanstalk, a vast space elevator that forms the heart of the sprawling mega-city of New Angeles.

This isn't just reflected in the fiction, either, with a wealth of new rules and options all designed to help you play out your neon and chrome fantasies.

There are new templates for playing as mechanical bioroids or long-limbed humans born and raised in micro-gravity, skills dedicated to knowing what's hot on the Net, and careers for hackers and tech experts. If you want to, you could build a cyborg cop armed with a futuristic hand-cannon and a drinking problem, or a genetically-modified courier with chameleonic skin and an ear for online gossip.

Beyond all the new options and slick tech on offer, there are a couple solid changes to the core *Genesys* rules. The first of these is a codified favour economy – a way of tracking who owes what and how big a deal their obligation might be. While it may seem like a pretty minor deal, it meshes incredibly well with the cyberpunk ethos of information being power.

The other major system laid out within *Shadow of the Beanstalk* is computer hacking or, to give it its official title, 'Running the Network'. Breaking into a well-protected system isn't settled with just a single roll, but rather a lengthy and involved process of battling defences and grabbing data where you can.

In many ways this acts as a kind of secondary combat system for the game and, just as the more hands-on members might buy new guns or combat drugs, a group's dedicated runner can equip themselves with all kinds of sweet tech to make things easier.

When it runs well the system can be wonderful. Having the runner work alongside the rest of the team, opening doors and disabling cameras as they break into a black-ops lab, can be a thrilling experience that really drives home the cyberpunk dream.

However, while the book has some fairly solid guidance on keeping things fun here's plenty of scope for it to be handled poorly. Having one or two characters spend most of a session trying to grab vital data while the rest of the table twiddles their thumbs can be unforgivably boring.

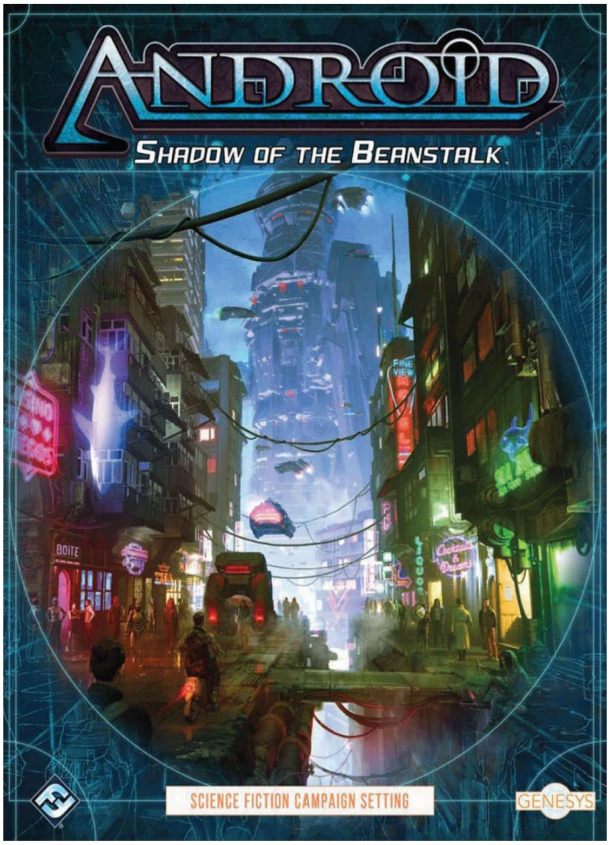
Shadow of the Beanstalk is a setting painted in broad strokes and, while it lacks any depth or – if we're being honest – originality, there's still plenty of room to build your own stories and characters. In fact, in many ways the generic cyberpunk feel of the book works out in its advantage.

With a slight shift to your perspective you can begin to approach *Shadow of the Beanstalk* as less of a setting guide and more like a general cyberpunk toolbox that *Genesys* GMs can plunder as they see fit. Yes, you can use it to run games set in the *Android* universe, but with only a bit of tweaking you can take a shot at something more directly inspired by *Blade Runner* or *Ghost in the Shell*, or even something of your own creation.

If *Shadow of the Beanstalk* was a little more off-the-wall, a bit more original, all this would become a lot harder. Perhaps that counts as damning by faint praise, but it's true.

Folks who are already invested in the near-future of *Android* and *Netrunner* will certainly get a kick out of the lore and info-dumps, and those that just want sweet cyberpunk rules will find exactly what they want. It's not the most exciting product of all time, but it works. Sometimes, what else can you want but that?

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



PLAY IT? YES

Like other *Genesys* settings the world of *Android* is rather cookie-cutter, but the rules have everything you need for a strong cyberpunk adventure.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... SHADOWRUN

It lacks the fantasy elements that make *Shadowrun* unique, but *Shadow of the Beanstalk* is a much simpler way to hack mega-corps in a dystopian future.

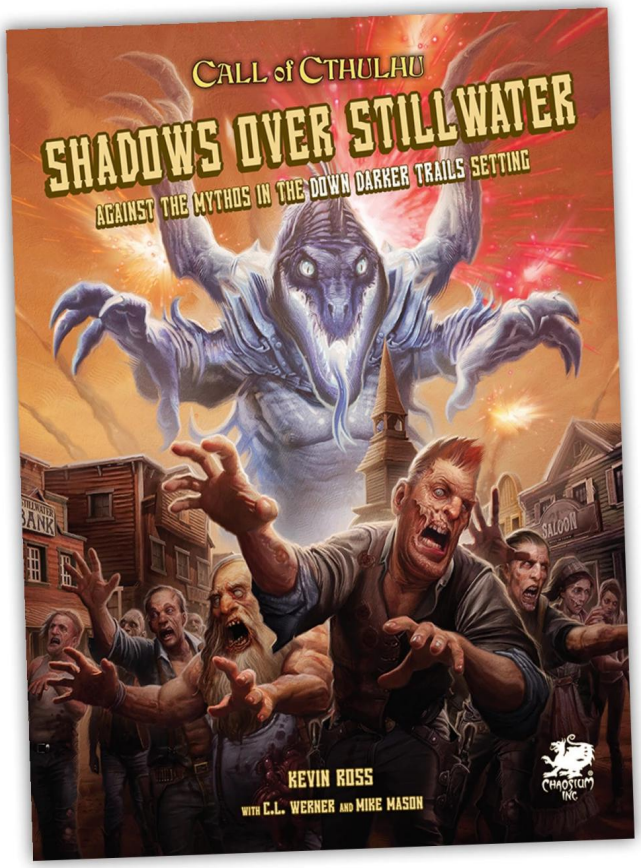


CALL OF CTHULHU: SHADOWS OVER STILLWATER

The Good, the Bad and the Weird

Designer: Kevin Ross, C. L. Werner, Mike Mason | **Artist:** Grilla, Golcu, Ware, Muzy, Leza, Ryan

176 | 13+ | £23



Lovecraftian horror and Wild West adventure don't seem like the most natural of partners, but *Shadows Over Stillwater* manages to blend a spittoon-ful of their mis-matched tropes into a series of sandbox investigations. While their content is more solid than spectacular, the setting alone should be more than enough to keep your posse yee-hawing through a few entertaining months of *Call of Cthulhu* adventure.

Built with the *Down Darker Trails* setting in mind, the action all takes place within an isolated stretch of New Mexico in the late 1800s. The slim book captures a time of gunslingers, rustlers, brave lawmen and wild prospectors roaming the dusty red hills, and into this already wild and dangerous world pours an unhealthy dose of eldritch weirdness that ranges from insane snake-men to slumbering star spawn whose diabolical magics can prove as deadly as any outlaw's bullet.

Again, this is weird. But reaching peak weirdness is one of the main aims of the *Cthulhu* games so it somehow works.

It's the fiendish plotting of these snake-men that forms the driving force behind a short campaign set around the titular town of Stillwater, which forms the bulk of the book's pages. While this technically consists of a trio of interlinked individual adventures you'd miss out on a lot of context and motivation if you tried to run them on their own.

The campaign opens with an entirely mundane hunt for a wanted murderer, but as the party explores the town they're likely to stumble across a weirder sort of mystery involving unusual fireworks, unexplained illnesses and worrying tremors deep underground. The first few days in town are set up as a sandbox of shops and saloons, and for a while the players would be forgiven for thinking they'd signed on for more conventional cowpoke adventures rather than anything Lovecraftian.

As soon as the investigators start feeling comfortable, however, things start getting odd and the mystery truly begins. Soon the party is battling undead settlers and dealing with the fallout of mind-melting rockets on the small town they've been exploring for the past few in-game days.

From there the investigators are led into a series of battles with more monstrous foes, ending up with a series of battles in mountaintop lairs and even a volcano eruption or two if things go badly. It's all action-packed stuff that lends itself to the swashbuckling adventure of the slightly tweaked *Pulp Cthulhu* ruleset, though this does tone does occasionally clash with moments where the smooth running of the plot depends on the heroes behaving with unusual restraint and care.

The second section of the book is devoted to a self-contained adventure set in the same rough area as the mini-campaign and, while it isn't particularly long, it fits a hell of a lot into its runtime. Over the course of a couple of sessions the investigators will encounter almost every western cliché imaginable, all tackled with a wild sense of enthusiasm. There are bank robberies, horse chases and mysterious gunslingers around every corner, all of which are given a uniquely Lovecraftian twist. While the final scenes can be a little confusing, this compact journey is probably the highlight of the entire book and seems to be the perfect way to introduce newcomers to the setting.

On that subject, it's worth noting that neither westerns nor the works of H.P. Lovecraft are particularly famed for their cultural sensitivity and, while the designers have tried to keep things vaguely respectful, there are still some aspects of *Shadows Over Stillwater* that folks might find hard going. Racism and intolerance may have been staples of the Wild West, but you may want to check in with your group before kicking off the campaign.

Shadows Over Stillwater is a decent little tome, albeit one that feels a little disjointed. If you feel like delving into the madness that is a Lovecraftian Wild West then it's a great way to keep a group entertained for a few months – if the concept isn't instantly appealing to you, however, it's unlikely to ever win you round.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

An entirely decent set of adventures in a weird Old West, with a handful of standout successes and a few weak points.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... ACHTUNG! CTHULHU

There seems to be no end of earthly settings that can be spiced up with a bit of Lovecraftian horror. If you like wartime weirdness you may well appreciate its appearance in the Wild West.



TO DIE FOR

Kieron Gillen unpacks his head-spinning comic book and RPG love letter to – and warning about – a life lived in fantasy worlds

Words by **Matt Jarvis** | Artwork by **Stephanie Hans**



When Kieron Gillen started writing a horror comic book about RPGs, he couldn't believe that nobody had gone with the obvious pun. *Die*: the perfect meeting of tabletop icon and macabre theme. Almost too perfect.

"It's the lowest of the low-hanging fruits," he thought. "This is so obvious, why has no-one done it?"

"I realised quite quickly, the answer of course is: it's almost impossible to Google," the author quips today, weeks after the release of *Die*'s first trade paperback, which collects the first arc of the comic.

Die was partly inspired by Gillen's fascination with what could've happened after the credits of the 1980s *Dungeons & Dragons* cartoon, which saw a group of kids vanish into the world of the fantasy RPG while riding a magical rollercoaster – the show's premature cancellation meant that the episode showing their return to the real world never aired.



"What I like about *Die* as a whole thing is it is a very accessible idea and it's quite a common idea: people go to a fantasy world. This is Narnia. And people get sucked into a game is another really common idea," Gillen says. "But it hasn't really been done like this."

In *Die*, the characters escape their childhood ordeal in a fantasy world – also called Die – only to return decades later as adults and confront their game master, who has spent the last 25 years trapped in the fantasy world. (In Gillen's words: "Peter Pan as a serial killer.") It's a dark, mature story as much about the bonds formed during shared gaming sessions as the dangers of detaching from reality, wryly summed up by its creator as "goth *Jumanji*".

"As well as a love song to many things I've adored, it's also a horror story," Gillen says. "Look at Sol, who is the main antagonist; how has my love of fantasy and genre and games emotionally stunted me? How has it caused me to objectify everybody else? How has it caused me to ignore everybody else?

"*Die* as a story is about the up and the downside of fantasy, and 'fantasy' in the wider sense. That's why I think you get complexity, which for me is always the exciting thing."

Like the unfolded d20 on its cover designed by illustrator Stephanie Hans, whose gorgeous visuals deliver the other half of the story's bleak tone, *Die* breaks down the nuts and bolts of fantasy and roleplaying to examine the draws and risks of a life lived in other worlds.

"The d20 is an icon," Gillen says. "If I showed you a d20, people would go: '*D&D*.' That's become its badge: its Mickey Mouse ears, its Superman symbol. d20 is it. So using that as a kind of device was fun."

The in-game classes of *Die*'s characters nod at the classic staples of *D&D*, while taking paladins, rogues and clerics in unexpected directions. Expect knights able to summon weapons with the power of emotion, cyberpunk rogues addicted to the substance needed to use their abilities and demonologists who've traded their control over demons for gods.

"Dictators are very clearly what happens if we took bards seriously," Gillen adds, referring to the emotion-manipulating class of *Die* narrator Ash. "Bards mess with people's emotions, make them feel better or worse. That's literally really creepy if you think about it for a second – let's do it like that. At the same time the Dictator is clearly a meta-critique on the bard. At the same time it's also its own thing."

Die's dive into the darker aspects of roleplaying, and savvy approach to picking apart the genre, marks it out as a comic that speaks directly to some of the fears that fuelled the 'Satanic Panic' decades ago, but with the confidence that gaming's acceptance in the mainstream means it can now, as Gillen puts it, "flirt [and] play with some of the imagery of some of the bleakest times".

"*Die* is almost, 'Yeah, the Christians were right to be worried,'" he says. "That's kind of the quote-unquote 'joke'."

HEAVY META

Die isn't just a comic about roleplaying games. It's also a roleplaying game about roleplaying games. As Gillen has penned the story in *Die*'s comic, he's also been creating a real, playable version of the game at the heart of the tale, which has increasingly fed back into the comic.

"It wasn't really me just writing the comic first then converting it," he says. "It's kind of that they both happened simultaneously. Sometimes I stopped working on the comic and then went over to the RPG and then back and forth. There was definitely a period when I was worried about which is the dog and which is the tail here. In the end the dog ate its own tail."

Gillen considers the comic and RPG two halves of a whole when it comes to the *Die* universe; the twist at the end of *Die*'s first arc came from an idea that Gillen had already created for the RPG, and every session of the RPG run by real-life players is considered part of the official comic-book universe.

"We say in the rules explicitly: 'Part of our *Die* world, you're in it. You're 100% defining *Die* canon as we go through,'" Gillen asserts. "It's a universe metabolised in its fanfic."

As the game grew into its own project and worked in spoiler moments from the comic, Gillen's ambitions for it expanded to encompass both a core rulebook (currently available in a free beta form online) and a separate arcana stuffed with lore.



"I was very aware that I made a weird thing, because it immediately grew out of control," the writer-designer says. "Some people have done a tie-in RPG for their comic; not many people have done what *Die* is."

In the comic, each character takes possession of a different polyhedral, granted ritualistically to them by the game master (who takes possession of the all-powerful d20). While players of the RPG roll a pool of six-sided dice for most tests – Gillen calls the design "quasi-1991" – each class can deploy its unique die to perform a one-of-a-kind action. Take the Emotion Knight, able to harness all their energy to eliminate a noun or verb from the current situation – giving them the chance to wipe out a 'mob' or even a 'city', as well as more abstract concepts such a 'weakness' or 'god'; a way of making the class just as viable outside of a fight as in combat.

"The most basic idea I ever had coming into the RPG was every player gets to own one dice, like the d20, and only you gets to touch it," Gillen says. "If the Grief Knight ever touches their d8 and gets it out, that's a big deal.

"That makes everyone else more mysterious, it makes you more special. The magicalness of that was always a design goal."



The roleplaying game in *Die* is more a stage for the drama of its players, and the real-life RPG is no different. Players don't just come up with a character in the in-game universe; they also create a 'persona' that represents the fictional person playing the game. In other words, it's a roleplaying game about people playing a roleplaying game. While the game's mechanics and dice rolls are used to power its characters in the world of *Die* along, it's the wider story of the people playing the meta-RPG that Gillen sees as the game's real hook. (Though he's quick to add: "I never say in the rules playing the more fun version is a failure.")

"Rarely anyone plays the character," he explains. "As written, the intent is the persona is the dominant thing – you're kind of mainly thinking about what is that persona's desires or weaknesses or what they wanted. They're real people; they're things like 'My marriage was a mess,' 'I've lost contact with my kids,' 'I enjoy my job but I'm worried about if I'm too old for it.' These very real-world fears and desires. The character is more like a robot suit. You climb inside the Evangelion suit and it makes you enormous and powerful, but inside you're still this screaming child.

"'We're going to make a real-world social group with people who are fucked up.' You say that upfront – ideally these people are lacking stuff.

"Whilst the characters are quite flexible, it's the personas who are the juice. They're the real interesting special sauce of seeing everyone's psychodrama come out."

The version of the *Die* RPG that Gillen has released as a beta roughly follows the comic's first arc, with a campaign tracing the general beginning and end over a handful of sessions. The writer-designer reveals his plans to explore other ways of running adventures in the game's upcoming arcana.

"You start at the beginning and at the end there's a sort of forced conclusion," Gillen says of the current in-game arc. "The fact you know the beginning and the end means you've always got a narrative structure. It can go extremely high-brow arty drama or it can go completely fun adventure, kill time. The fact that we've got those two points means that it basically holds together as a story.

"You're playing more at a narrative level. You're not necessarily playing to win, as much."

BEYOND THE END

Despite his success as a writer – his previous series, music-mythology musing *The Wicked + The Divine*, was showered with plaudits – Gillen is the first to admit that *Die*'s RPG represents his first real steps into game design.

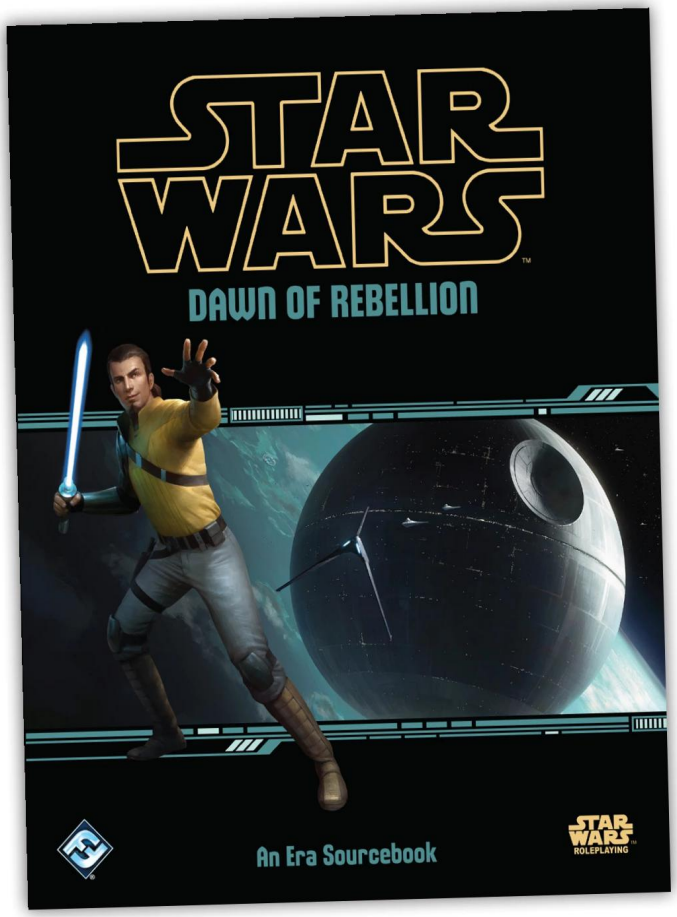
"I'm aware that I'm not in any way a professional at this," he says. "I've taken it very seriously, but this is an enthusiastic amateur."

It's the author-turned-designer's enthusiasm that serves as the sturdy foundation of the *Die* RPG, which even in its early stages is a lengthy and detailed creation that already outweighs many published games in both its polished presentation (helped by Hans' sterling artwork) and ambitious – but thoroughly coherent – world-building.

"There was a level of going big on it," Gillen says. "Which is fun – this is absolutely more than anyone can reasonably expect. And that's why we did it – because doing stuff which frankly only I'm stupid enough to do is a worthwhile thing to do."

Gillen already has a set end in mind for *Die* as a comic (something the story has in common with every series he writes), but the scope of the world and the stories it can inspire – both its creator's and the players contributing directly to its history – leads him to reveal his desire that "there's more to tell". *Die*'s name may have been the obvious choice; what it's become has been anything but.

"That's my advice to new creators: think about what you really care about," Gillen reflects. "If you don't do it, no-one will."



STAR WARS: DAWN OF REBELLION

Rebels with a very good cause

Designer: Various | **Artist:** Various

2+ | £30 | 144

Dawn of Rebellion bills itself as the first 'era' sourcebook for Fantasy Flight's range of *Star Wars* RPGs, and few things demonstrate how closely it's tied to a specific time frame than its sections for adventuring on Alderaan and the Death Star, neither of which are particularly viable options by the time the credits roll on *A New Hope*.

Designed to work with all three of the subtly different rulesets released by the studio, the book aims to set up adventures in the early days of the Rebellion. It paints a picture of a time when the Galactic Empire was riding high, unrest was spreading across the stars and Luke Skywalker was still drinking blue milk on an isolated farmstead. It's a time of stealth missions and sabotage rather than pitched battles, where the heroes are likely to be desperate renegades rather than superpowered warriors.

In many ways you can think of it as an accompaniment to *Rogue One* and the *Star Wars Rebels* series, with many of the new character options and enemies clearly inspired or even directly pulled from them. For example, the very first player specialisation in the book is the kind-of-a-Jedi-but-not-really 'Force Adherent,' based on *Rogue One*'s blind, stick-wielding monk Chirrut Îmwe, while Darth Maul (the top half of him, anyway) is given stats for use as a villain.

If the deuterium-dense array of assumed knowledge in that sentence didn't make it quite clear enough, *Dawn of Rebellion* is definitely a book that will appeal to the more hardcore end of the *Star Wars* fan spectrum. It's probably safe to assume that anyone who's playing an RPG set in the universe is already pretty invested in the franchise, of course, but this is a book that will reward GMs and players who want to dig deep into the lore and are looking for something a little more rooted in the galaxy than the usual lightsaber and blaster-fuelled heroics.

Indeed, the tone of the book is a little closer to the more realistic and morally grey galaxy presented in *Rogue One* than that starkly black and white one of the original trilogy. This includes a section setting out guidelines for creating antagonists that can act as a foil for the party without necessarily being outright evil, and for running a campaign with the party battling oppression as a cell of rebels.

That doesn't mean that there isn't plenty of scope for grand adventure in weird and wonderful locations, however. Several planets that could be important in the early stages of the Rebellion are described in detail and, though they may not be known to players without a detailed knowledge of the *Star Wars* expanded universe, each one includes a mini-adventure designed to introduce them to the new location. These are more like sketched outlines of key events rather than fully detailed instructions, but they're fun, serviceable ways to get the ball rolling.

For most groups, the most exciting of the new areas to explore probably won't be a planet (or, indeed, moon) at all, but rather the titanic Death Star. The book goes into enough detail to let you happily run a couple of adventures aboard the planet-killing space station but manages to be just brief enough to avoid the trap of reading more like a technical manual than a sourcebook.

In many ways the small section completely defines what *Dawn of Rebellion* is aiming for – a well-crafted chunk of content squarely aimed at making diehard fans very happy indeed. It's a book for those who would grin when they come across the stat blocks for Grand Admiral Thrawn and Mon Mothma in their heyday and are intrigued by the implications of playing as a retired clone trooper.

You could potentially argue that the book is a little on the slim side – and when you cut out everything that you could probably piece together with a couple of hours on Wookiepedia it gets slimmer still.

That doesn't change the fact that it's still a beautifully put-together volume. If you're looking for a new spin on roleplaying in that galaxy far, far away it's well worth a look.

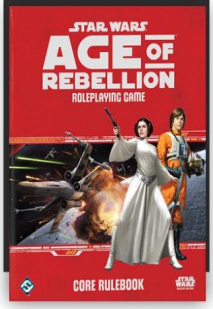
RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A nifty little sourcebook that opens up a whole new era to play in, complete with an array of iconic characters and locations.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... STAR WARS: AGE OF REBELLION

While *Dawn of Rebellion* works with any of the Fantasy Flight *Star Wars* RPGs, *Age of Rebellion* is probably the most appropriate one to work off.





BUILDING ON BACKSTORY

Some characters have already led an epic life before they arrive on the table; others only reveal their past over hours of gaming. Either way, rich backgrounds can often make for unforgettable stories

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

Morris was never a particularly complex character, and this was reflected in his backstory. A tale slim enough to be laid out in a single WhatsApp message, it explained that the young wood elf had set off for a life of adventure after rejecting his family's habit of hunting for sport, training as a ranger in order to preserve the wilderness and the creatures that lived there.

It was a small chunk of history, especially when compared to the multi-page essay penned by the party's bard, but it did everything it needed to; there was a reason for adventuring, a link to their motivations and a rough end-goal of protecting the world's wildlife. It wasn't the kind of thing, however, that you'd expect later quests to hinge upon.

Nobody, therefore, thought to make a connection between Morris and the masked elven monster-hunters they met in a tiny woodland settlement. Their personal interest in him was written off as just one of the many worrying quirks of the blood-hungry hunters, alongside the array of pungent heads and trophies hanging from their saddles and a preference for their meat to be served extremely rare.

Soon after, the party was lured out to an isolated logging camp with reports of a monster attack, only to find a well-prepared trap waiting for them. Their leader claimed that if Morris was so concerned about the plight of the hunted, he should experience it himself.

Still, the rather oblivious elf seemed blissfully unaware of any possible connection until one of his comrades turned to him and asked why the masked villain had the same hair as him. And how they knew his history. And why they'd just called him "brother".

With a smile, Morris' extended family unmasked, grinning smiles filled with pointed teeth, and announced that the party had a five-minute head start.

EARLY YEARS

Adventurers, heroes and renegades don't just pop into existence fully-formed – unless, that is, you're playing in a universe filled with rampant flash-cloning. The noble knight probably served as a fresh-faced squire to a more senior warrior, the bounty hunter might have learned her trade on the neon-lit streets of her hometown and the wisecracking gangster likely started off his career as just another faceless henchman.

This, essentially, is their backstory. Usually it comes in a wonderful blend of history, family drama and secrets that gets written up on character sheets, emailed to the GM or stored in some neat little notebook.

Exactly how deep this history goes varies from player to player and game to game, of course. A knockabout one-shot where the party whomps a few goblins in a hillside cave isn't likely to draw on a character's extensive family tree quite as intensively as a multi-year campaign set in a sprawling shared game world, for example.

Some titles place such importance on it that they come with built-in backstory generators that can truly tie a character into the game world, such as *RuneQuest: Roleplaying in Glorantha*. If you run through every aspect of the lengthy character generation, you'll be able to name which historical battles your grandmother fought in and run off a detailed description of your upbringing.



Kids on Bikes dedicates much of its first session to fleshing out players' characters and the world they live in

Others take a more collaborative approach to the process, where everybody decides their history as a group. *Kids on Bikes,* a game about plucky teens facing weird mysteries and mortal danger, dedicates most of the first session to a long roundtable where the players decide on what their small town looks like, how the party all know each other and how their relationships stand when the action kicks off.

Even when the game or GM doesn't particularly call for something deep and fully fleshed-out, there are always players that seem to revel in building the foundations of their character's personality. They're the ones who will turn up to the first session with a binder of past acquaintances and family ties, as well as tales of their apprenticeship and the inevitable tragedy that sent them into a life on the road.

These players are a gold mine – provided you have time to actually read the chunky tomes they present – but that doesn't mean that the rest of the party needs to be left in the shade of their well-mapped achievements. Not everybody wants to write up a long, detailed backstory and that's fine. Sometimes, you can make a little bit of history do a lot of work.

THE THREE COMPONENTS

When I run a game that calls for some kind of backstory, I generally ask the players to make sure that their backstory has three things – the same three things I found in Morris' miniature write-up.

Firstly, they need to have a **reason for adventuring** (or investigating, exploring or whatever else the main theme of the game is). Even a fantasy world of dragons and elves has innumerable cobblers, farmers and merchants, so why has their character taken on a life of danger and discomfort?

Second, there should be some **link between their past and their current motivations**. Sure, the bounty hunter wants to get rich, but was that because she grew up on the streets and saw the horrors of poverty? Is it because they had a chance meeting with a corporate executive and wants their luxurious lifestyle?

Finally, they need a **rough end-goal or aspiration** – something they're working towards. Maybe they want to slay the dread necromancer that ravaged their kingdom, maybe they just want to be impossibly famous. There just needs to be some target or ideal they're striving for – or why are they doing this in the first place?

So long as these are in place, you have a pretty solid backstory to work with. There are plenty of details missing – names, places, dates and the like – but all that can be filled in later.

It's worth noting, however, that a backstory isn't really meant to be a complete tale all by itself. It's meant to be a foundation – a solid base that the GM and players can then build on together.

LAYING STORY STONES

One of the greatest pleasures that comes from GMing comes when you neatly tie a player's backstory into the current threads of the story. There's nothing sweeter than having the party seek out a criminal contact to smooth out their nefarious plans, only for them to find that the guy they meet is the same mafioso their thief ripped off for the shiny dagger they brought to the first session.

It instantly reminds the players that there's a world beyond what their characters see, and that everything is living and breathing around them. On top of this, it does an incredible job of bringing a certain character into the spotlight for a session or two, especially when the mafioso demands a personal favour as compensation for past "complications".

As a rule, I try not to make the fallout from backstory notes be explicitly negative, as that just feels as though the players are being punished for their creativity. Sure, things may start off rough between the wise guy and the thief, but at least they now know how their contact works and whether he can be relied upon – something they wouldn't have with a neutral stranger. At the same time, the player usually gets full veto powers over elements being added or polished up by the GM, as nobody likes having their history changed against their will.

Every now and then, however, the backstory threads don't just fold into the existing story, but rather inspire their own series of adventures. Family obligations can come back and hit a character out of the blue, or perhaps the chance to achieve that rough goal appears unexpectedly.

These are great fun and a wonderful way to get players invested into the story you're weaving – though one thing I have learned over the years is that not all players are particularly comfortable with being thrust into a position of attention with little to no warning.

Ultimately, a backstory should be used as fuel for a campaign's story, and players should be encouraged to bring in elements of it whenever they can. Their lives started long before they started adventuring, after all, and that shouldn't be erased the moment they strap on their armour and head off to battle the local monsters.

HOW WE MADE

FATE CORE

The flexible RPG system put no limits on creativity and let players take their story into their own hands, leading to some of the most imaginative roleplaying experiences out there

Words by **Owen Duffy**

The world of roleplaying offers a vast array of experiences, from the monster-infested caverns of *Dungeons & Dragons* to the hostile universe of *Traveller* and the mind-warping horror of *Call of Cthulhu*. For decades, RPGs have transported players to weird and wonderful settings using only dice, pencils and the power of imagination.





But while most roleplaying releases focus on a particular fictional backdrop, others have bigger things in mind. Released in 2013, *Fate Core* doesn't attempt to cater to any individual genre. Instead, it hands players a toolkit to build their own worlds, creating characters and locations from scratch and telling any kind of stories they can conceive of.

It's a bold, narrative-driven approach, and over the years it's won the game a legion of loyal fans. We spoke to its creators to learn about its origins, and how what started as a personal project released for free online grew into a thriving and respected indie games studio.

READY TO ROLE

Like many roleplayers, *Fate Core* co-creator Fred Hicks traces his roots in gaming to *Dungeons & Dragons*.

"I first got into RPGs through a kid called Eamon in third grade," he explains. "He was in school, tinkering with the *D&D Red Box* in plain sight. I remember I was absolutely fascinated by all of the dice.

"Right from the get-go I started hacking and house-ruling my own games. But I didn't really have friends I could play them with until I got into high school and college. Over those years I played a ton of games like *Champions, GURPS* and *Amber*."

It was a diverse mix of games, and it exposed Hicks to some of the vastly different approaches creators had adopted to RPG design. *Champions* was a tabletop take on superhero comics, casting players as spandex-clad avengers battling twisted and dangerous foes. *GURPS* was a versatile but mechanically complex game that let players explore a huge range of fictional and historical settings. *Amber Diceless Roleplaying* pioneered a more story-focused approach, eliminating dice altogether in favour of careful plot progression and character development.

Each had an effect on Hicks, but one game in particular was to have a significant impact not just on his gaming life, but on his career.

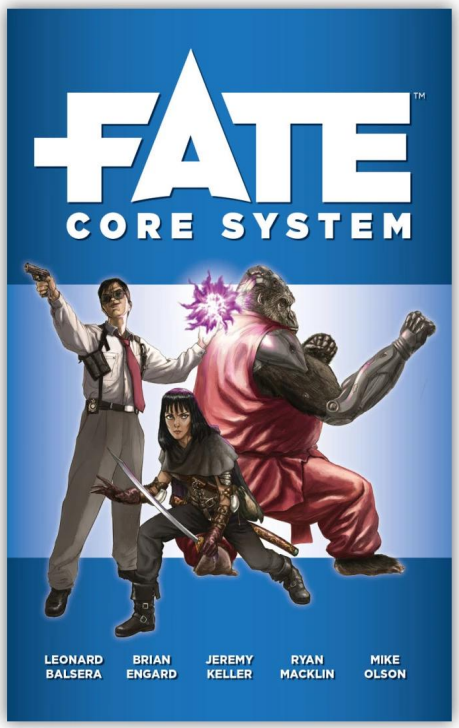
Fudge, released in 1992 by designer Steffan O'Sullivan, was a flexible roleplaying system designed to be used in any type of game, from fantasy adventure to cyberpunk spy thriller. At its heart was a system known as 'the Ladder.' Rather than the numerical skill ratings commonly found in other RPGs, *Fudge* characters ranked their abilities using a set of descriptive adjectives. A character with low combat ability might be ranked as "poor", while their better-developed skills in arcane research might be rated as "good" or "great." Whenever they encountered challenging situations, players would roll special dice marked with plus and minus symbols, using their position on the Ladder as a starting point and letting the dice dictate whether they performed better or worse than their natural abilities might suggest.

What particularly attracted Hicks to the game was the ability it handed players to modify its core mechanisms to suit their own needs. Eventually, though, he began to feel that elements of the game could be improved.

"I was drawn to *Fudge* because I was a constant system tinkerer," Hicks says. "But over the years, I came to feel that while *Fudge* gave me a full toolbox, it didn't give me a lot of good pre-built parts to work with."

Fortunately for Hicks, *Fudge* had been released under an open licence, allowing other designers to change and redistribute it however they wanted. He teamed up with gaming friend Rob Donoghue to develop its barebones framework into a more fully-featured RPG. They clarified the system for character creation, with players building protagonists with an array of skills, backgrounds and personal connections. They developed a system for collaborative worldbuilding, letting players work as a group to create the setting for their adventures. But perhaps most importantly, they shared responsibility for the game's narrative development between the game master and players.

Where *Fudge* had given players the ability to tweak plot elements or alter dice rolls, Hicks and Donoghue elaborated on the concept. They granted players 'fate points' for effectively roleplaying their characters in ways that introduced drama, danger and excitement to their games – a move that distributed storytelling opportunities around the table and rewarded players for acting in the best interest of the plot rather than focusing solely on their own

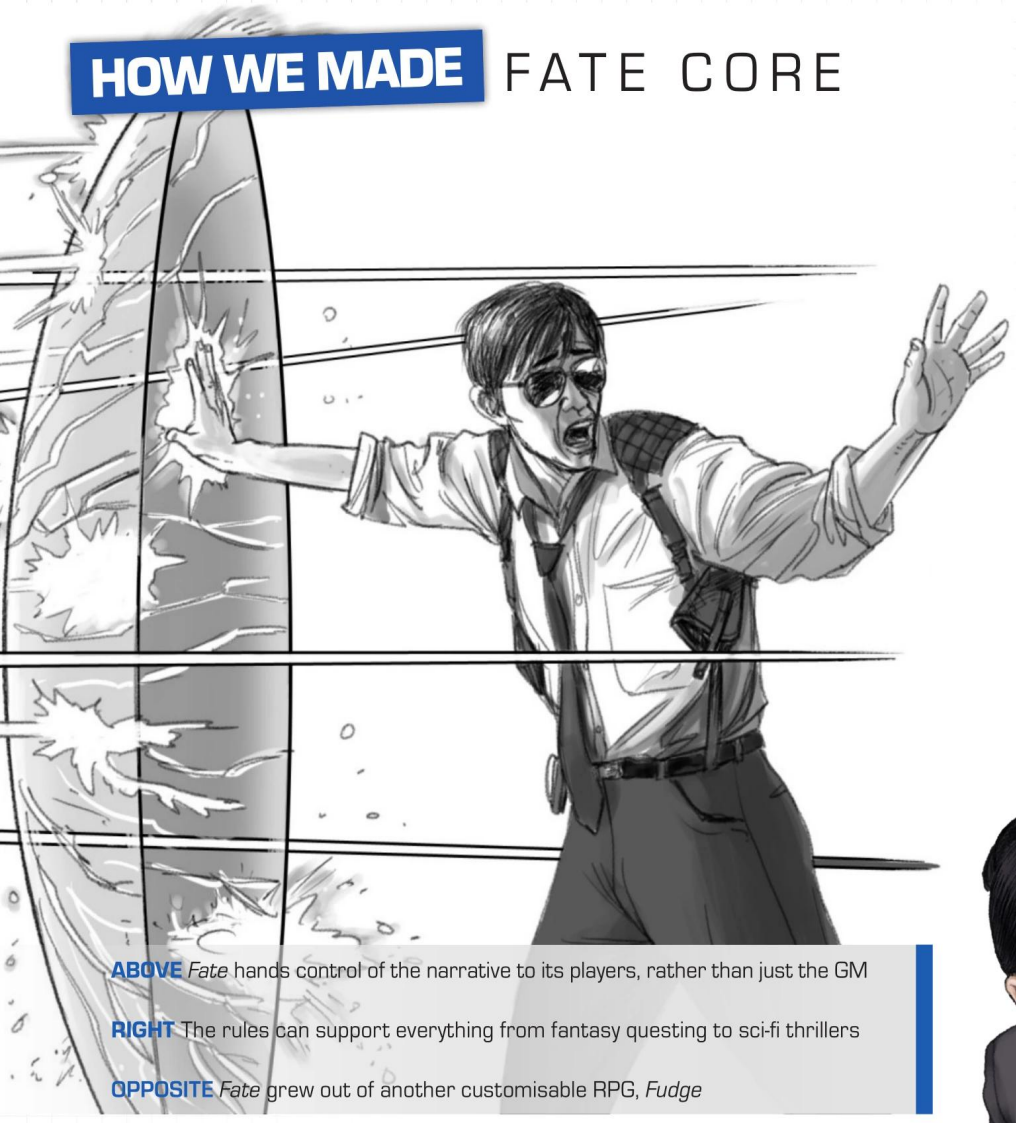


MAIN IMAGE *Fate Core* hands players the tools to create their own world to roleplay in

ABOVE The game's systems have been harnessed by plenty of official spin-offs, too

RIGHT The definitive *Fate* ruleset made over $430,000 on Kickstarter

HOW WE MADE FATE CORE



ABOVE *Fate* hands control of the narrative to its players, rather than just the GM

RIGHT The rules can support everything from fantasy questing to sci-fi thrillers

OPPOSITE *Fate* grew out of another customisable RPG, *Fudge*

character. It was a markedly different approach from most other roleplaying systems, which put overall authority for the story squarely in the hands of the game master. It was also a method that seemed to carry the possibility of players derailing the game – but Hicks argues it's less of a concern than players of other RPGs might assume.

"It's a bit like being worried about a knife without taking the whole kitchen and all the cooks into account," he says. "Yes, that knife could absolutely cut someone if it's handled incorrectly. But a knife is more than its danger; it's a tool. And for a kitchen to run well it's every chef's responsibility to make sure that folks are using the tools properly.

"Is it a problem to ensure that players behave in a way that upholds the table's consensus of what the game and story is about? Well, yes. But when that happens the problem isn't the rule; the problem is that not everyone who sat down to the table was on the same page.

"Any time you choose to give players power over the story, you're running the risk of someone committing a foul rather than simply throwing a curveball. Sure, maybe toss celery into that peanut butter instead of the chocolate folks were expecting, but don't dose it with rat poison."

"Okay," he adds, "I may have a problem with my overuse of metaphors."

TEMPTING FATE

Hicks and Donoghue made some major alterations to *Fudge*'s foundations and named their new game *Fate*, releasing it online as a free download. But, while they'd been pleased with how their system had worked in their own games, they weren't prepared for the enthusiasm it met from other players. One fan in particular became instrumental in the game's evolution from a homebrew system to a professionally-published RPG.

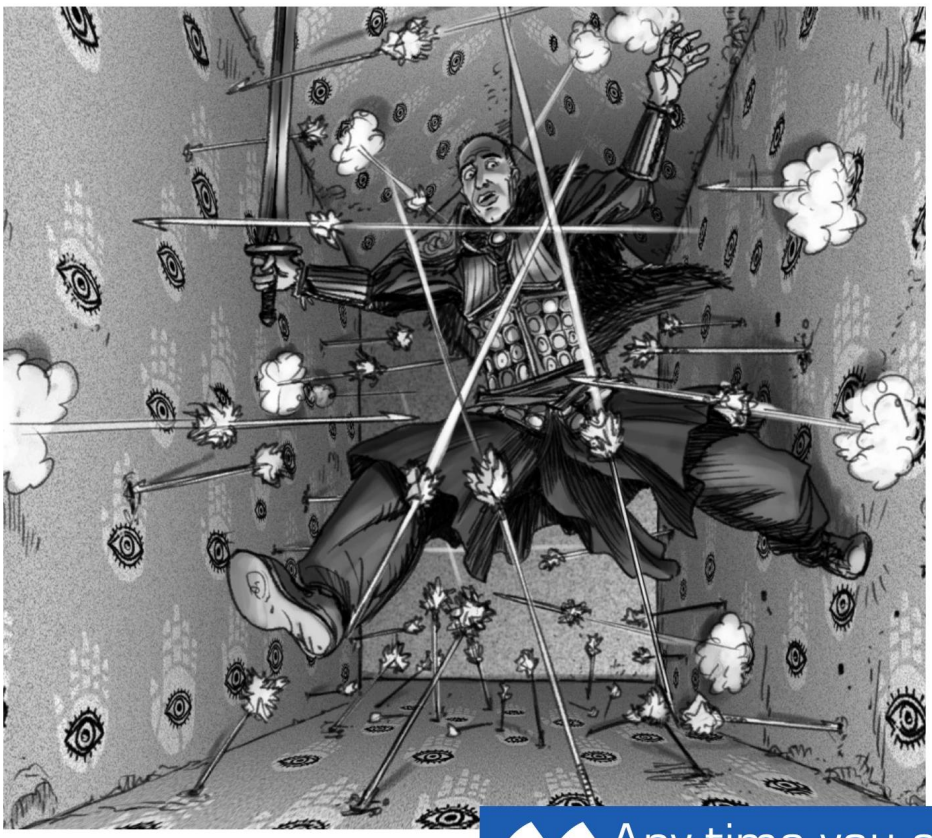
Author Jim Butcher, the creator of a series of novels starring the supernatural detective Harry Dresden, knew Hicks through online roleplaying games. He offered the *Fate* team the chance to create a licensed game based on the series, and game designer Leonard Balsera built the *Fate* concepts into a new standalone game: *The Dresden Files*. While the game took years to develop, Hicks and Donoghue were buoyed by the opportunity, deciding to dive into games publishing as a full-time business.

"Rob and I established Evil Hat as a publishing company in 2005 on the back of getting the offer from Jim Butcher," Hicks explains. "But we had zero publishing experience. We'd gotten onto the radar because we'd put out the rules for *Fate* and gathered a community of interested gamers around them.

"Looking at that lack of experience, I started charting a course that would get us to it. I severely underestimated the time involved, but we did cross it eventually. Early on, in 2006, we leveraged the early rise of affordable print-on-demand services to release our first two games: *Don't Rest Your Head* and *Spirit of the Century*."

The company's games met with praise for their narrative-first approach, and eventually the team decided to release a definitive version of the *Fate* system. To fund its publication, they turned to the crowdfunding website Kickstarter and, while they'd established a sizable community of players behind the game, they were stunned when players pledged over $430,000 to support the project.

"We didn't



expect it at all," says Evil Hat's vice president Chris Hanrahan. "And what blew us away even more was the number of people who backed the project. After all this time, we are still number three on the list of most backers of all time. That skyrocketed our reach and growth."

MAKE IT YOUR OWN

Since its Kickstarter success, the line of *Fate Core* books has grown to include the *Fate System Toolkit*, a guide to hacking and modifying the game to suit a variety of different play styles. It's also gained the *Fate Adversary Toolkit*, helping game masters to come up with opposition and antagonists for their stories. But what may be most impressive about the game's growth is the community of designers who've tweaked and reworked the game to their own ends.

Sophie Lagacé is one such creator. After releasing several fan-made *Fate* hacks, she was signed up by its publisher as a project manager. Her work includes *War of Ashes: Fate of Agaptus*, an RPG adaptation of an indie miniature wargame. She argues *Fate* is ideally suited for adaptation to multiple genres.

"My process starts by deciding what features and qualities of a setting I want to include," she explains. "Then I examine the system toolbox to pick the mechanics which best accomplish this. My rule of thumb is to stick to the simplest solution. For example, doing more with existing aspects is more appealing to me than adding a new type of character ability."

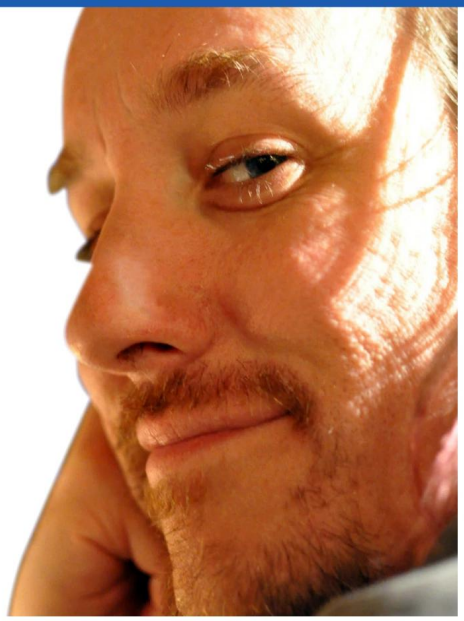
> "Any time you choose to give players power over the story, you're running the risk of someone committing a foul rather than simply throwing a curveball."

Lagacé sees a bright future for the game and, at a time when industry-leading titles like *Dungeons & Dragons* and *Pathfinder* are renovating their games with high-profile new editions, she predicts *Fate*'s immediate future will be considerably more stable.

"I don't see any big changes coming, particularly to the core rules," she says. "Because it's a toolbox system, we already have a plethora of variations that include using skills, approaches, stress tracks, consequences, conditions and all sorts of extras. These are custom tools that can be tweaked infinitely to fit a particular genre or setting. In other words, I don't expect a new edition will be needed for a long while, but custom implementations will continue to flourish."

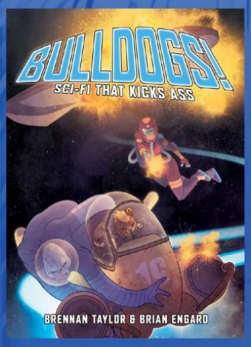
But while the basic rules may be firmly established, Lagacé says there's plenty for fans to get excited about in upcoming releases.

"I expect to see a generation of releases connected through settings, campaigns and arcs that share worlds," she says. "We're already seeing something like this in the recent Kickstarter campaign for the *Uprising: Dystopian Universe RPG* [based in the world of social deduction games *Coup* and *The Resistance*], and the ongoing one for of science-fiction supplement *Tachyon Squadron*. We've released a lot of great settings – now I think it's time to show how they can really shine."



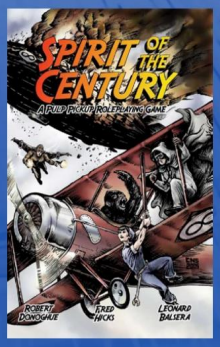
TWISTS OF FATE

Fate's flexible approach to roleplaying has given rise to a huge number of add-ons letting players explore a host of exotic settings. While many are published by studio Evil Hat itself, there's also a thriving community of independent designers developing standalone games and new material for the system



BULLDOGS!

Bulldogs! casts players as dropouts and fugitives battling to eke out an existence in the furthest reaches of the galaxy. Far from civilised space, you'll find clients willing to overlook your shady past and provide you with a steady source of income – as long as you don't mind the risks.



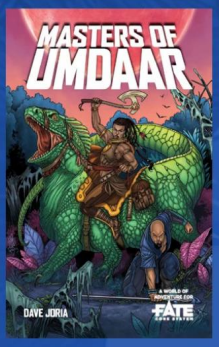
SPIRIT OF THE CENTURY

A pacey pulp adventure, *Spirit of the Century* is packed with colossal airships, biplane dogfights, mad scientists and murderous villains. Like a chaotic mash-up of *Indiana Jones* and *Justice League*, the game puts its focus squarely on action and drama.



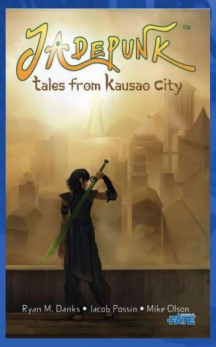
EAGLE EYES

The streets, forums and back-alley drinking dens of ancient Rome are seething with violence, intrigue and ambition. *Eagle Eyes* combines the setting of the world's most powerful empire with film noir sensibilities, casting players as private investigators solving murders and unravelling conspiracies.



OF UMDAAR

A tabletop tribute to the likes of *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* and *ThunderCats*, *Masters of Umdaar* drops players into a technicolour world of savage beasts, intelligent robots and deadly laser blasters.



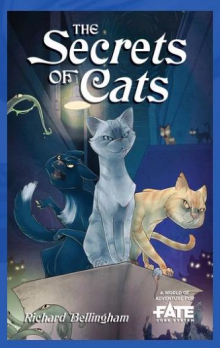
KAUSAO CITY

A combination of steampunk stylings and Chinese wuxia martial arts films, *Jadepunk* casts players as warriors battling against an oppressive council of rulers using a blend of deadly fighting prowess and advanced technology.



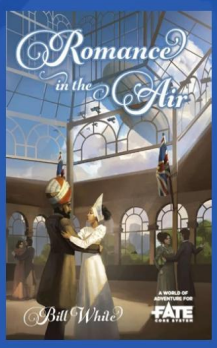
DRESDEN FILES

This game, based on the series of supernatural detective novels, lets players enter a world of hardboiled occult mysteries. Filled with characters and settings from the books, the RPG lets players interact with the original stories in new and immersive ways.



THE SECRETS OF CATS

This imaginative setting sees players become pet felines, harnessing their wisdom, bravery and magical prowess to confront an ancient threat. Your human owners may not know it, but you're all that stands between them and the grasping darkness.



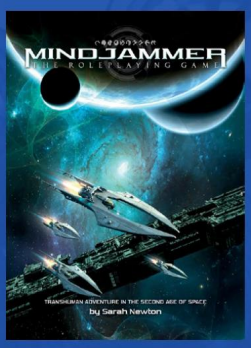
ROMANCE IN THE AIR

Romance in the Air casts players as travellers on a voyage around an alternate Europe, where great airships amble across the skies and personal and political vendettas can quickly turn deadly.



MASTERS OF THE MINISTRY

It's 1958, and the Earth has been invaded by aliens. This *Fate* setting sees players become members of the ministry tasked with fighting the otherworldly threat in a setting that merges John Wyndham, *Quatermass* and *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*.



JADEPUNK: TALES FROM MINDJAMMER

This game of grand-scale space opera takes place in the second age of human expansion into the universe. Technological advancements have redefined what it means to be human, and the gulf between the stars offers adventure, glory and unimaginable dangers.



MASKS OF NYARLATHOTEP

Go mad for the classic campaign all over again

Designer: Larry DiTillio, Mike Mason, Paul Fricker, Lynne Hardy, Scott Dorward, Lynn Willis

665 | 13+ | £99

With its wide array of frothing cultists, ancient ruins and apocalyptic drama, *Masks of Nyarlathotep* has helped to define the tone and feel of *Call of Cthulhu* for almost three decades. Thanks to this highly polished update, it looks set to keep chewing through hapless investigators years to come.

'Update' may not be quite the right word for what this is, however. Make no mistake: this is something far beyond the comparatively minor changes that have come with the new editions rolled out on a regular basis since the 1984 original. Despite this, it's certainly still the same campaign that has consigned so many parties to gibbering madness, which begins with a bizarre murder in a New York hotel and ends with a battle for the sake of reality as we know it.

Most of the changes are subtle and carefully considered, with a bit of historical detail added here and tighter phrasing there, but the team handling the new version weren't afraid to make major alterations where they felt it was needed.

Where the traditional opening threw the party into the deep end with the vague hope they'd be able to swim, this fresh take on *Masks* kicks off with a new prologue chapter set in the highlands of Peru. It's a modest, self-contained adventure that should last for a couple of sessions and serves as a mini-campaign of sorts, introducing the characters to the game and allowing them to get to know Jackson Elias – an NPC whose gory death triggers the main campaign.

This sets the tone for many of the other changes in the new book, which aim to smooth out some of the rockier areas of the original; as well as giving the players a guaranteed motivation to uncover the secrets behind Elias' murder, a real effort has been made to eliminate or downplay some of the more uncomfortable racial stereotypes that pervaded earlier editions.

In this same vein, the team behind the book took the decision to tone down the lethality of the campaign by a notch or two. While this may seem like heresy to dyed-in-the wool *Masks* fans, it's fair to say that the classic version tended towards the psychotic in places. The tweaks introduced manage to preserve the looming sense of danger that is an iconic aspect of the campaign – and, indeed, *Call of Cthuhlu* as a whole – while avoiding the risk of having players cycle through a long list of investigators with increasingly tenuous connections to the overall story.

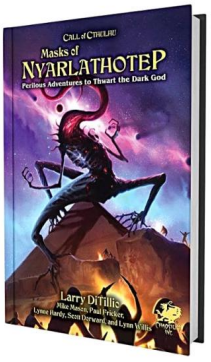
Alongside this, plenty of effort has been made to simplify campaigns using systems other than the basic *Call of Cthulhu*. The text is stuffed with sidebars explaining how the adventures can be adapted for the swashbuckling antics of the *Pulp Cthulhu* system, cutting down on the legwork needed by GMs.

Admittedly, that still doesn't make running *Masks* a simple endeavour, no matter which system you're using. The book weighs in at well over 600 pages, and if there are any downsides to the campaign they lie in the amount it demands from the GM; there are dozens of plot threads and weaving trails of clues and contacts running throughout the book, as well as a thick stack of handouts that need to be printed off or sent out to the group in advance.

Indeed, the players themselves will also need to be on their toes if they want to have a good time with *Masks*. The campaign is based around investigations and problem-solving rather than rolling dice and blasting away at enemies – if your group is more inclined towards scoring loot and racking up kills than interviewing contacts and tailing suspects, this may not be the wisest of investments.

If you have a year or so to devote to a single campaign, as well as a group of friends you can trust to treat it with a little respect, *Masks of Nyarlathotep* won't disappoint. Just maybe try not to get too attached to the first set of characters you roll up.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

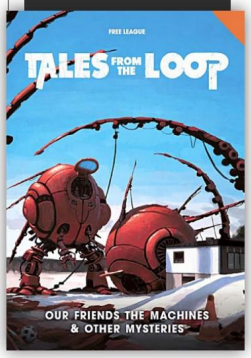


WE SAY

There's a reason why so many doomed investigators have thrown themselves into *Masks of Nyarlathotep* over the past 30 years, and this update is the ideal way for modern players to see what all the fuss is about.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... TALES FROM THE LOOP: OUR FRIENDS THE MACHINES & OTHER MYSTERIES

The wide-eyed excitement of *Tales* couldn't be further from the dark and dangerous world of Lovecraftian horror shown in *Masks*, but both share a love of uncovering mysteries and a free-form approach to investigation.



ROAD TRIP

The end of the world doesn't need to all be creeping darkness and earth-shaking doom. Instead, it can be the rip-roaring high adventure of the open road. We talk to Marc Langworthy about vehicular violence in the post-apocalypse in the new Devil's Run RPG

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**

Ah, the open road. A Sunday drive. Going out for a little spin. Doing a sweet jump in your Valkyrian apocalypse buggy so you can one-handedly fire an automatic weapon at your enemy as you fly gracefully above them like an improbable and deadly automotive eclipse. These are all very good ways to spend our time with man's other best friend, the car.

Bringing the Mad Max thrills of post-apocalypse to our tabletops mostly brings to mind the endless roads of car-murder of *Devil's Run,* or *Car Wars,* from which it evolved. These games work on a 'death arena' style of combat that evokes the idea of sports as much as it does war.

We last spoke to Marc Langworthy about adapting the colossal *Kings of War* universe into an RPG. Today we're talking about how exactly you make an RPG about what amounts, at first glance, to a destruction derby.

Langworthy introduces us to the world that he has helped create more fully, "It's a zany, Mad Max, post-apocalypse in North America. There's a lot of tongue in cheek involved. And a lot of throwbacks to the 80s and 90s in terms of the characters and where the personalities of the post-apocalypse are drawn from. It's just this big crazy mess of car wars along the highways of North America."

Buckle in then, as we take a tour of the sight of this bizarre and cartoonish world of screaming metal, screaming tires and, occasionally, screaming player characters.

IF YOU GO TO SAN FRANCISCO

The game grew out of a relationship between Langworthy and Wordforge Games. Having been previously invited to do some background work on a handful of *Devil's Run* factions, Marc was approached to develop the RPG from there. The game runs on Modiphius' 2D20 system – used in *Mutant Chronicles Third Edition*, *Conan*, and *John Carter Warlord of Mars*. There is a *Savage Worlds* conversion in the book too, for those not quite ready for a low roll to be a good thing.

Langworthy was involved most heavily in the creator of two of the factions, BritAttack and Justice. These factions, like everything in *Devil's Run RPG* are focused mostly around the west coast of what was the USA.

"The game is set around San Francisco, which is a relatively safe zone and in post apocalypse and there are two main gangs there. The Law, a haulage company, who are actually pretty much the bad guys. They're ex-convicts who broke out of prison and after the apocalypse masqueraded as the law and took over. They had a long running war with another faction called Hauls Angels who are loose play on the chapters and biker gangs of our era."

"So, you have this end of the world San Francisco. And then they both have other factions that are either allied with them or freelance. There's the Justice who are an 'all lady' faction. They're very evangelical and kind of mixed up with barristers and The Law, holding courts and that kind of thing. Almost the Judge Dredds of the post-apocalypse. And the BritAttack – who are one of Mark's [Wordforge Games] favourite factions – they're Texans that survived the apocalypse and headed up to the safe zone. These crazy Texans have absorbed different bits of what they believe is British culture and got it horribly wrong."

There's a certain amount of hijinks implied by the factions here. The high contrasts between them simply heightening the silliness at play. This is then tied with the 2D20 system itself to produce clever and meaningful actions.

"Developing the factions gave me a lot of groundwork," says Langworthy, "what we wanted to do with the post apocalypse 20 years on was to take those themes and mesh them with my work with 2D20. The great this with this system is that we can tailor it to every setting."

One of these ways is the use of something termed 'momentum'. Players can begin to build up momentum in the game, which can be used to ensure their wild antics come off, or at least, have a better chance of it. There's always going to be a few spills amongst your thrills, but the ability to improve a roll or reroll a dice can be the difference between a graceful skid to flipping your vehicle entirely.

"The players have lots of ways to kind of contend with that," says Langworthy, "and in terms of 2D20 they have 'momentum', which is very much a player resource. The more successes you create within a test, the more you earn momentum. They can use that to increase the power of attacks. Or if they're in a social situation, they can increase the outcome of their success, or reduce times of certain skill tests and that kind of thing."

The idea here is to give players more benefits to good rolls, so nothing is wasted, explains Langworthy, "It's kind of rewarding that depth of success rather than just an instant pass or fail."



DEVIL'S RUN RPG



VEHICULAR VIOLENCE

Naturally, vehicular combat is a big part of the game, and a challenge for making the whole experience visceral and compelling. It's something that might be difficult to get your head around initially as so many roleplaying games try hard to keep you in one or two locations. The idea that you could always be in motion, and especially in combat, is something that adds a whole new dynamic to the way most of us think about these games. So how does it work?

"Each vehicle is its own zone," says Langworthy, of the way space and movement is thought of within the confines of the game "you can run on a grid system, a measurement system, or just go with the flow if you prefer."

"You almost become your vehicle once you step into it," says Langworthy, suggesting that playing out combat in these moving death machines is like using much loved equipment in other games, it becomes second nature to the players.

"We've opened up a lot of talents for the drive skill," says Langworthy, which is an obvious choice for a game that asks you to ram your quarry off the highway if you want to have a chat, "there's a whole chapter on vehicular combat in the rulebook, giving you some momentum options for your vehicles. If you are in a pursuit of somebody, you can use momentum close the distance on them. And, because you can roll something that's called complication within 2D20 system, you can use momentum to overcome that."

The combat itself is barbarous, "we wanted to keep the Conan-esque feel to the combat. And then some of the talents and skills are more



indepth, animal handling for example. You know, your average dog will be anyone's friend in the post apocalypse," says Langworthy, smiling, "but when it comes to car wars then skills like 'drive with your knees' come in to play when you need to drive and shoot somebody. You've obviously discussed with the GM that you'd like to make that jump and land, and as you're in the air you're just going to try and hose the car below you. We've kind of rigged the number of actions that you are available. Normally in most systems, it might be the case of you have a standard action and that would be 'driving.' This is possibly a 'go-to' talent for this system. Our system allows you to be able to take that drive action, but also take another standard action, in this case to hose the car with bullets as you fly through."

"And then earning things like momentum would allow you to improve the outcome. Maybe you might hit some debris as you land, which is going to require another driving test and spin you out of control," says Langworthy.

There's plenty of ways to total your vehicle in the game, but unlike other RPGs where driving is an option, but not necessarily something your characters need to be good at, it's unlikely that you're going to crash your car every game. Unless of course you're crashing it in to someone else.

"The vehicles can definitely take a bashing between each other. That's what they're designed for," says Langworthy, "we want players to feel like they had agency with a vehicle. But if you're out of



RIGHT Jousting in the post-apocalypse

OPPOSITE (TOP) The BritAttak

OPPOSITE (BOTTOM) The Jets faction uses forgotten flight technology to power their vehicles

BELOW Not the type you'd stop to 'axe' for directions





a vehicle and caught in a firefight, it can go quite badly quite quickly."

Even if you do end up writing off your car, there's a chance to tinker with your vehicle and get it back on the road between tearing up the tarmac.

"We've brought in a downtime system. There's a kind of sub-phase at the end of the game where you've got a bit of downtime to repair your vehicle or perhaps, hopefully, gain a new one," says Langworthy, "It has an abstract kind economy in terms of currency. You're able to spend your dollars in sourcing replacement parts or modifications or upgrades. Or even find them in the game if the GM is generous. So that's, that's one of the rewards alongside experience points."

THE END OF THE WORLD ISN'T THE END OF THE ROAD

We joke with Langworthy about whether he's come a 'fallen world specialist' – with the Kings of War backstory including a fallen god and a scarcity of resources, and him starting out with Modiphius's Mutant Chronicles. But like any game set at the end of the world, we have to ask the question, why would you want to be playing in it?

"We try to present it as the players can be essentially nice people trying to be a small bastion of light and in this horrible post-apocalypse. The nice thing about the world that I find refreshing is it's not an end of the world where everything's horrible and people will inevitably die. There is the opportunity to create these deals, and these factions have survived and even thrived in some cases," says Langworthy.

And it's true, the playable factions are, for the most part, imbued with something human and good. There are some factions on the darker side, but important design choices had to be made here.

"The Skinners faction are the kind of, The Hills Have Eyes [notorious Wes Craven slasher classic] type faction that, you know, they've done horrible things to survive. Those factions are there, but I didn't want really necessarily want to make them playable. If people want to do that and they go off and do that. I just didn't want to give you tools to necessarily do that within the bounds of the game," says Langworthy. It's an interesting line to draw in roleplaying games, but something that's tied to the themes and goals of this world. This isn't Fury Road, this is more Thunderdome.

"I didn't want to make the roleplaying game too dark. The board games definitely tongue in cheek and you can see that by the miniature range, the character names, and some of the play off of the eighties and nineties characters we talked about. I wanted to delve into the post apocalypse so that people can know things are bad. That we might need to do some not very nice things to survive in terms of, you know, taking prisoners on the highways, fighting for resources. But I don't want to personally cross certain lines into elements like cannibalism and giving people the tools to do that kind of thing," says Langworthy, expressing, quite rightly, that grizzly horror theme aren't for everyone, "and I'm very respectful of the changes, for the better in the roleplaying scene. I suffer from PTSD myself, so I am quite sensitive to it I guess."



not total brutality. It's not a world in complete collapse, only on its knees. We're looking at a place that could, in the right hands, be rebuilt. And there's a wide world away from that of North America which survives and in a couple of places, thrives.

"There's an agreement between the other countries and organizational bodies to continue dropping aid into North America because there's such a massive collapse," explains Langworthy, "but that's slowly tapering off. This is where the kind of fight for daily survival comes in. We're not really aware of the greater picture or the global politics of who else may be out there specifically."

Instead, we have a plethora of factions to meet that might put you in mind of Wacky Races, as much as anything else. Playing out adventures in this world is one partially of desperarte survival, bombastic action, and, possibly most importantly, farce.



HEREDITARY MISHEARING

The quick start adventure introduces a bunch of misfits of the BritAttack faction. Langworthy describes these as something like Gangs of New York or Peaky Blinders in flavour, but approached through a strange kaleidoscope of misunderstood Britishness.

"There is an overall leader who had managed to trace some ancestry. It really fascinated him growing up. He became aware of that his family were also related to an English Lord," says Langworthy, "so he renamed himself. As Lord Ponsonbysmyth and established the clan."

The flavour texts for the clan describes them as adopting a strange hybrid accent – if the mid-Atlantic accent is sometimes confusing, try Texan-mock-British. While we're unsure if it's sustainable for an entire campaign, it's certainly going to be fun for the first attempts. This sets the tone for the whole game really, that of the gentle BBC comedy like Blackadder or Hitchhikers Guide To The Galaxy. This shouldn't detract from the weight of the adventure, but should allow for cheesy lines shouted during a precarious chase along a winding Californian mountain path.

"Naturally, they started to tailor their vehicles to fit their new identity," says Langworthy, returning to the BritAttack, "you have sub-factions like the Muggies clan who drive very Mini-shaped buggies, the Chalkie clan who are like white van drivers wearing boiler suits in Clockwork Orange style. And of course, the taxi drivers who modify their cards into Hackney Cabs and dress in a confused variation of the traditional pearly kings and queens."

The latter here make up the heavier firepower of the faction and offer us a glimpse of the misremembered connections of a past world that make up this one. It's a joy of all post-apocalyptic







civilisations to see what they've got wrong about our world, equally of course, we shouldn't laugh too much, who knows what we're misinterpreting from our own pasts.

The free quickstart adventure invites the players to take the roles of a handful of misfits hoping to make their way into one of these sub-factions.

"They're not very well liked amongst the clan, and they're kind of kept on the outskirts," says Langworthy "so they get taken under the wing of the Lord protector of the realm, Lord Hood. He's the second in command and one of the old friends of the governor, Lord Ponsonbysmyth. Ponsonbysmyth is becoming sick from radiation, but nobody really talks about it within the clans. He's fading. Lord Hood is trying to lay foundations for succession. And he's kind of taking the misfits under his wing as his 'can do' group which is their inroad to hopefully build some reputation and make a success themselves in the BritAttack."

The game invites a certain kind of silliness, and the urge for a GM to fill a game with jokes, misunderstandings and needless ceremony that is often missing with more 'serious' takes on the end of the world. A refreshing reminder that there's always time for one more road trip.

TOP The Vykers gang

ABOVE A stray dog is anyone's friend at the end of the world

RIGHT Probably not the kind of firefighters we're used to

OPPOSITE (TOP) The fight for resources is serious

OPPOSITE (BOTTOM) One of the slightly tankier vehicles the game lets you dream up



TO ERR IS VARIANT

From forgotten rules to rolling the wrong dice, every GM makes a mistake now and then. But small slip-ups don't need to completely derail your story – here's the best ways to deal with screwing up

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**
D&D illustration by **Zoltan Boros**

The blow that felled Thistle was a mighty one indeed. His foe, a towering ogre, had landed a particularly effective strike with her tree trunk-thick club and the bard hadn't been in the best of health to begin with. Rather than falling to the ground injured, as had happened many times before, the half-elf was slain where he stood.

Thistle's friends let out of a roar of horror, some weeping and some cursing the bard for his foolish choice to charge their foes head-on. Within a few short seconds the enraged adventurers had felled both the ogre and her smaller allies and the battlefield was silent and still, save for the soft tears of mourning heroes and the distant sound of birds scattered by the fighting.

With no way to get Thistle's broken body to a healer potent enough to reverse death itself, the party decided to dig a shallow grave and decorate it with the bard's broken lute. He would be mourned, but life had to go on.

And then time froze.

"Oh, instant death is at negative max *HP, not half. Yeah, sorry guys, that was my bad. Thistle's totally still alive."*

When things started moving again the grave was no more. The shattered lute was safe, barring a few minor dings, and the ogre's club was much less gory.

Thistle shuddered for a moment, feeling strangely disconnected with the world. Perhaps it was the wound he'd taken in that last fight? If that blow had been a little harder, it could have been curtains for the bard.

He shrugged, and followed his chattering friends deeper into the woods.

HISTAKES MAPPEN

Tabletop RPGs can be complicated beasts. There can be dozens or even hundreds of rules that might apply in this or that situation, some of which can be more than a little obtuse. Most of the time we manage to muddle through pretty well, but if you're playing a complex enough game it's all but guaranteed that you're going to make mistakes.

Honestly, though, this is fine.

Most of the time the mistakes we make as both GMs and players don't really matter too much. Over the years I've rolled the wrong dice for attacks, forgotten that dragons don't really care about fireballs and confidently cited rules from a completely different game published 15 years previously.

While it's a little embarrassing when you fluff things up, the tangible impact of having a creature move a metre more than it should or giving a +1 when the rules say it should have been a +2 is generally insignificant in the grand scheme of things. Indeed, plenty of rulebooks even have a section somewhere near the front explaining that when you're unsure of a rule it's much better to make up something that makes sense than to put the game on hold while you pore through tables and charts.

> "When you're unsure of a rule it's better to make up something that makes sense than to put the game on hold."

Being able to quickly and confidently deal with rules quibbles and queries is one of a GM's greatest powers, but every now and then we realise that a mistake we made was actually pretty significant, with consequences that reach far beyond a few lost health points or a single missed shot. Sometimes a misunderstanding or misremembering of a rule can kill off a beloved character, save a hated foe or generally throw players' best-laid plans into a tizzy.

What do we do then?

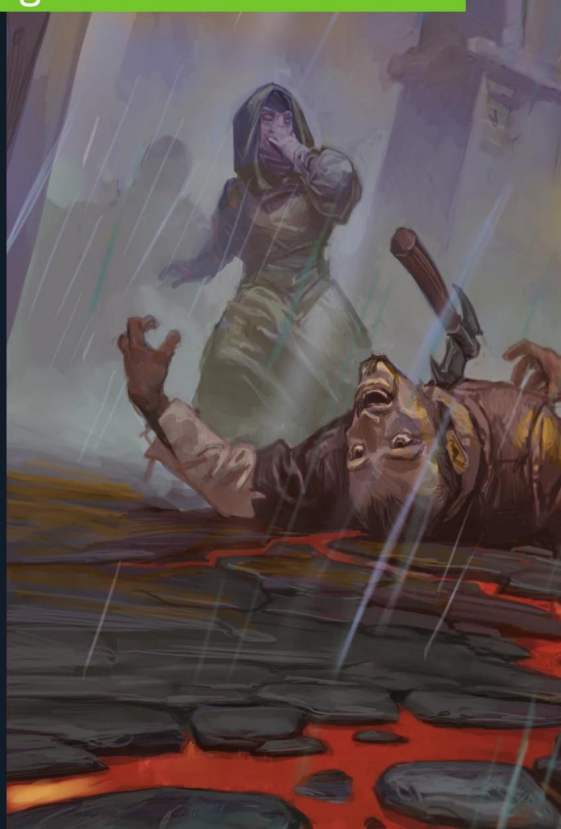
RETCON OR RIDE OUT?

There's an argument to be made that the best answer is "nothing at all". A GM is expected to make rules calls at the table and there's nothing strictly wrong with saying that whatever decision they made was – for all practical concerns – completely correct.

This is a perfectly reasonable stance and one that many folks hold fast to. However, while you can argue 'technically right' 'til the cows come home, that isn't going to stop your players being annoyed if you – to choose an example at random – have an ogre squish their character to death because you got the massive damage rule wrong.

Merely reversing the decision you made can get tricky, though. Rewinding battles or encounters usually isn't particularly practical or entertaining, especially if the error only rears its head when you pop open the rulebook to double-check a rule the night after you wrap up your gaming session.

Fortunately, there are a few different paths you can take to help smooth out the worst of your GMing slip-ups.



HUMAN

The 'Never Happened'
"Huge club? Flattened bard? Nope. Don't remember that."

In situations where reverting a major mistake is a simple matter of wibbling around the last few minutes, don't hesitate to mess with the space-time continuum. Yeah, it's not ideal for immersion but most players aren't going to mind so long as it seems fair.

You're only likely to run into major problems when the game's moved on a fair bit after the mistake was made. If the party divert their entire quest in pursuit of bloody vengeance, everyone is going to look a little silly when the slain adventurer wanders into shot and acts like they've been there all along.

The 'Obvious GM Fix'
"Okay, so our spaceship definitely exploded two weeks ago, because if it didn't why'd we spend three hours battling through the void? Isn't it lucky, then, that a near-identical replacement was laying about in this hanger?"

Sometimes it's too much of a stretch to retroactively change things up, but at least you can try and repair some of the damage caused by a mistake. If you handle things well, this can actually become a plot point of its own.

Maybe that adventurer did die after all, but just as their friends finish up the wake they stumble into the tavern with no memory of the past week and a mysterious sigil tattooed on their chest. That's not just fair, it's cool too.

The 'It Was All a Dream!'
"No." Don't do this.

The 'I'm Sorry!'
"Our castle burned to the ground, the evil lich got away and Balthazar the mage is dead. But at least the new guy has a really cool magic sword."

Sometimes your mistakes are impossible to fix without creating new ones or simply tearing the fabric of your game world into tiny shreds. In this case the only reasonable decision is to let the error stand, but if you feel bad there's nothing wrong with a 'sorry I immolated your wizard incorrectly' present.

Obviously you don't really want to make this a regular thing, but if you run a game where having your character croak comes with major penalties – such as having to start out from level one again – you could definitely consider relaxing them if your own mistake played a major role in their tragic passing.



SAVIOUR OF THE UNIVERSE



The Savage World of Flash Gordon brings the legendary space adventurer crashing into roleplaying. Writer Scott Woodard runs us through the approaching pulp sci-fi *ah-ahhhhhhh*-PG

Words by **Matt Jarvis** | Illustrations by **Bien Flores, Chris Bivins, Aaron Riley**

The story of *Flash Gordon* is the story of every roleplaying game ever told. In Alex Raymond's original 1930s comics, a normal – swoony good looks and Yale diploma aside – human being sets off to a strange and wonderful world accompanied by his friends, ready to battle evil and have countless adventures week after week.

It seems odd, then, that only one major roleplaying game based on the iconic series has ever been made. Published by Fantasy Games Unlimited in 1977 – the same year as the better-remembered *Traveller* – Lin Carter and Scott Bizar's *Flash Gordon & the Warriors of Mongo* was one of the very first sci-fi RPGs, hitting the tabletop hot on the heels of the groundbreaking *Metamorphosis Alpha*, released the previous year and considered to be the original sci-fi RPG.

In fact, most roleplayers are more likely to have come into contact with *Flash Gordon* through its brief mention in another, just slightly more famous roleplaying game than its own complete adaptation.

"*Flash Gordon* owes about as much to its swords and sorcery roots as it does its science-fiction roots," explains Scott Woodard. "Its pedigree can be traced directly to things like the 'Barsoom' and 'Venus' stories of Edgar Rice Burroughs, and it's no surprise that Gary Gygax – co-creator of *Dungeons & Dragons*, of course – included the work of Burroughs in his 'inspirational reading' list in the original *Dungeon Master's Guide*."

Woodard is the writer of *The Savage World of Flash Gordon*, an RPG based on the entire *Flash Gordon* canon that hopes to finally give the king of the impossible his due. Unlike Flash's last RPG outing, which predated the cult Queen-scored movie, Woodard has drawn equally from Raymond's original comics and everything that followed in the eight-plus decades since.

"There's no denying that the 1980 film is the first thing that comes to mind to many, if not most, when you say the name Flash Gordon, and that's perfectly fine with me!" he says. "In fact, there are plenty of things that link the game to that film, including the same iconic logo, our poster map of War Rocket Ajax, and the fantastic and personal foreword to the core rulebook penned by Flash himself, Sam J. Jones!

"Beyond that, once you expose yourself to the vast amounts of material that predated that movie – this includes the radio, film, and TV serials – you quickly realise that what the filmmakers gave us in 1980 is surprisingly faithful to that material!

"While I focused most of my attention on the original newspaper comic strips by Alex Raymond, Don Moore and Austin Briggs, published between 1934 and 1948, I also watched all the film serials starring Buster Crabbe, I listened to the radio plays, I watched the TV series from the 1950s, I read the novels from the 1970s and I watched all of the episodes of the Filmation animated series. From all those sources and even a few others – some of which might surprise you – I took copious notes and then worked hard to find ways to make elements from all of them work together."

FLASH FORWARD

The end result is a game that presents the entire universe of *Flash Gordon* as a sandbox for players to explore and use to tell their own Flash stories. Woodard eagerly claims that any of Flash's previous outings, from the pages of comics to his on-screen incarnations, can be fully recreated using the ruleset – with some necessary caveats.

"There were some things in the original strips that I chose not to include, like certain racial stereotypes and other somewhat unpleasant things that were very much the unfortunate products of their time," he explains. "For example, in 1934, Flash and the gang meet up with a race of 'brown dwarfs.' For obvious reasons – especially based upon the way they were depicted on those original pages – I felt it best to avoid that name and opted, instead, to refer to them as 'mountain dwarfs.' This in turn inspired me to come up with a variety of other dwarf races including Frigian ice dwarfs, Arborian forest dwarfs and the red ember dwarfs of Flame World. There were a few other things that I decided to alter for 21st-century sensibilities, but in all cases, I think the results actually work better for the game and offer more options for the players and GMs."

In other cases, Woodard encountered situations where 80 years of dozens of different creators putting their own writing, illustration and lore into *Flash Gordon* had required fans to knit the connected universe together themselves.

"Filling in gaps and repairing glaring continuity issues was actually great fun," he says. "Forging the backstories of kingdoms and popular characters, finding ways to make various species work as playable races, and





designing religions, laws, and new technologies were all possible, and I had fun doing it.

"The innocence and apparent lack of logic in the original comic strips also gave me a lot of leeway in designing things. When the original strips presented a cave system with inverted gravity and blamed the effect on a super-dense meteorite, or had our heroes visiting Birdland and interacting with a royal advisor in the form of a talking parrot named Talky, everyone just accepted it as an example of the otherworldliness of Mongo."

This loose, pulpy approach means that *The Savage World of Flash Gordon* manages to feel like a very different kind of sci-fi RPG compared to its modern, simulationist successors, bringing its comic-strip style and sense (or lack of) along for the ride.

"*Flash Gordon* is a setting where the laws of physics and our understanding of science and technology are effectively ignored in favor of an embracing of the impossible," Woodard enthuses. "While there are rocket ships, robots and rayguns, it's more 'magic' that drives these things than complex circuitry or sophisticated programming. In other words, those who are comfortable with the concepts of spellcasting and enchanted items found in most fantasy RPGs, will have no trouble embracing the way the world works."

SAVAGELY FUN

While all roleplaying games offer some degree of freedom to their players, *Flash Gordon*'s letting go from the tethers of reality required a more open and flexible system than most.

The Savage World of Flash Gordon is based on the entire universe, from comics to movies

FLASH GORDON RPG



"A quick read of some original *Flash Gordon* strips and you'll find raygun battles, sword fights, fisticuffs, chases, leaping, tumbling, flying and other outrageous feats of derring-do," Woodard says. "All of these things can easily be adjudicated using the *Savage Worlds* system."

A generic roleplaying system that made its debut more than a decade ago and has gone on to power dozens of games, *Savage Worlds* is known for its fast gameplay that refuses to get bogged down in excessive detail – the perfect fit for *Flash*. To play *The Savage World of Flash Gordon*, players will need to combine the book with the core *Savage Worlds* rules, which runs through the unique way the system tackles roleplaying.

"From its inception, *Savage Worlds* was designed as an engine for playing pulp adventures in which heroes can perform larger-than-life actions using an intuitive, streamlined system," Woodard says. "Unlike some other popular RPGs, where the extent of a player's turn is often reduced to 'roll to hit,' *Savage Worlds* encourages the players to do outlandish things on their actions à la 'I want to leap from the balcony, grab the chandelier, swing over the table, and drop onto the bandit!' A request to do something like that from a *Savage Worlds* player is not only encouraged and celebrated: it is easily resolved through the ruleset."

The Savage World of Flash Gordon is more than a lore guide for *Savage Worlds* players, though. The tome introduces specific gameplay changes inspired by the distinctive feel of the universe. These include combining climbing, swimming and throwing into the single 'athletics' skill – handy for those wanting to create their own stocky polo player – and replacing lockpicking with the more generalised talent of thievery, opening the door for sneaky characters to perform sleight of hand and disable traps. To bring *Flash*'s galaxy of dancers, actors and singers as seen in the comics better to life, characters can now also have the skill of performance.

"There are other new rules and options as well, including some new creative combat options for those getting raises on their tricks and tests of wills, fast healing for wild cards, and a fun planetary romance setting rule that helps emulate the sudden and complicated romantic relationships so common in the classic comic strips and serials," Woodard adds.

The single biggest addition is the 'cliffhanger,' a cinematic way of getting out of a sticky situation that the group of players can choose to activate by flipping a token. This then allows them to come up with a solution as a group, forcing the GM to explain their escape or having the players choose one of six preset cliffhanger cards that offer up ways for the story to go with some extra benefits for the players. These often lead to further escapades, as the group might be captured, suffer hazardous effects or end up facing an even bigger threat.

Cliffhangers have a chance to refill players' bennies, *Savage Worlds*' fate-twisting tokens that can be earned in other ways and spent to reroll duff dice results, reduce damage and generally avoid the action coming to an unsatisfying stop. *The Savage World of Flash Gordon* builds on the ability to play with destiny by introducing conviction tokens, a special kind of benny that adds to a result rather than rerolling, making heroic acts easier to pull off at the right moment.

Although inspired by the particular tone of *Flash Gordon*, Woodard reveals that the gameplay tweaks also hint at the future of the wider *Savage Worlds* system.

"Since *The Savage World of Flash Gordon* returns to the pulp roots that originally inspired the creation of *Savage Worlds*, the timing of the setting's development was ideal in that the next edition of *Savage Worlds* – what is tentatively being referred to in-house as '*Savage Worlds Black*' – is on the horizon and thus we were able to tease some of the new rules that have been kicking around for a few years now," he says.

"From day one, the *Savage Worlds* ruleset was tagged as being 'Fast! Furious! Fun!' When I first started writing *Flash Gordon*, I altered that phrase – at least in my own documents – to read: 'FLASH! Furious! Fun!'"

GORDON'S ALIVE!?

While the 1930s gave rise to dozens of influential creators and characters that remain just as well-known today, from King Kong, The Addams Family and Mickey



> "The innocence and lack of logic in the original comic strips gave me a lot of leeway in designing things."

Mouse to Batman and Superman – both of whom were influenced by *Flash Gordon* – few survive that have quite the same sense of pulp adventure and campy tone as the sci-fi hero. It's hard to imagine the Batman of today using shark repellant spray and punching baddies to POW! and BAM! signs.

"The central characters found in *Flash Gordon* are relatable and timeless archetypes," Woodard suggests as to why the series has survived obscurity. "Flash is 'Joe America', Dale is a strong, independent woman, Dr. Zarkov is the good guy scientist who may be more wizard than chemist and Ming the Merciless is the iconic, moustache-twirling baddie. You'll find similar characters in most adventure stories, including, of course, *Star Wars*."





Star Wars creator George Lucas was actually one of the directors linked to the big-screen adaptation of *Flash Gordon* in the 1970s, and went on to write his own sci-fi saga after struggling to land the rights. After passing through hands of other big-name directors including *The Man Who Fell to Earth* visionary Nicholas Roeg and spaghetti western auteur Sergio Leone, the film was later helmed by Mike Hodges and penned by *Batman* writer Lorenzo Semple Jr., adding to its eccentric style.

"Both properties exhibit a number of similarities – and if *Star Wars* can continue, so too can *Flash Gordon*," Woodard insists.

Woodard says while he was "encouraged to avoid adapting too many things directly from the film", *The Savage World of Flash Gordon* still features several nods to the iconic movie, and he had free rein to make the tabletop adaptation of the entire series a new step for the franchise as well as a look back into its past.

"Over the decades, every version of *Flash Gordon* has been slightly different than the previous while retaining iconic elements like Flash, Ming, the Hawkmen, Arboria, et cetera," he says. "While most presentations of that material have focused on individual stories and characters, the RPG needed to make all those elements work together within 192 pages, but there were no organisations standing over me, telling me what I could and could not do with the licence."

Woodard adds that he was even surprised by how well the universe lent itself to a roleplaying setting as he went about weaving decades of *Flash Gordon* together.

"One perfect example of that was when I tried to figure out some way to bring Klytus, the black-robed, gold-masked aid to Ming in the 1980 movie, into the game," he recalls. "I wanted to have psionics in *Flash Gordon* from early on, as mind powers were certainly common in old comics and serials and some psionic elements did eventually appear in the later *Flash Gordon* dailies.

"Klytus seemed to be a good candidate for psionics based on things he did in the film. His concealed visage, his strange rejuvenation chamber and his rather disgusting demise at Flash's hands all inspired the concept of psionic decay for those blessed with psionic abilities in the game. It also led to explaining the symbol on Klytus' robes as representing the Ministry of Psionics, placing Klytus in the School of Telepathy, and accepting General Kala as yet another telepath based on her own black clothing, matching symbols, and even her name, spelled with a 'K'."

MORE THAN A FLASH

Woodard has future plans to keep expanding his *Flash* universe outside the world of Mongo.

"There are other things I would love to add to the line including an Earth sourcebook, since the version of Earth in the strips and in the serials is rather different from our own, as well as a planetary sourcebook to take Flash and co. out beyond Mongo," he says. "I do have notes for a possible 'moons of Mongo' supplement, as well, as Lunita and Exila were added to the canon in the late 1940s and it would be fun to get players off-world on occasion.

"While the primary setting of the *Flash Gordon* stories is the planet Mongo, and this is what we focus on in the RPG, the possibilities for adventure are seemingly endless. Even the original comic strips took Flash and co. back to Earth and eventually off to other stars in the daily comic strips of the 1950s."

It's taken a while for Flash to return to role-playing but, this time, it seems the savior of the universe is finally receiving a hero's welcome.

WHEN NOT TO ROLL

Hands off that d20! Not every test demands a decision by dice, and forcing players to roll can kill the fun. Here's when to pick up the polyhedrons, and when to let sleeping dice lie

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image by **Alex Chambers**



Sir Bercilak was strong of arm, noble of spirit and ever so slightly dim. He also knew what he liked – and that was taking in the sights and sounds of the forest he loved during his rare days off from adventuring.

His destination today was an isolated stretch of woodland that his friends had explored a week or so earlier. It perched atop a nearby outcropping of stone that stood around three or four times as tall as the knight, and would have been rather difficult to climb if the party hadn't set up a rope the last time they'd been there.

When he reached the scramble it was bright and sunny. A good day for wandering the woods, Bercilak thought, as he grabbed the rope, still firmly secured around a stump a few metres above him, and pulled.

Somehow, he failed to make any progress. His feet had slipped on some loose rocks, it seemed.

Again he tried, and once more bad luck prevented him from making the short climb. This time it was his hands that failed, slipping from their place on the rope as he tugged.

On the third try, however, the knight all-but flew up the slope, bounding to the top in a matter of scant seconds.

That had taken much longer than it should have, Bercilak thought.

KNOW YOUR ROLL

Everybody loves rolling dice. The clatter and tinkle they make as they bounce across the tabletop is enthralling; the rising tension that wells up as you peer at the result is intoxicating. Over the decades it's become a core part of the RPG experience, and personally I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world.

But sometimes things work out best when we take a momentary break from throwing the bones, and let things play through without bringing blind chance into it; allow things to happen as the party wants them to, because that's what makes sense.

Sometimes we need to make the choice not to roll.

Quite a lot of the time this decision is so obvious we don't even realise we're making it. Walking across a room, for example, is generally regarded as a pretty low-risk activity, as is buying a drink at the tavern, climbing the stairs and riding in the back of a stagecoach. Unless things are going very wrong indeed, it's hard to think of a reason to call for a skill check to pour your character a martini.

Often, however, things are a little less clear. Driving a car is technically a risky activity, and one with major consequences if we screw it up, but is a trip to work something we should ask players to roll for? How about riding a horse, or climbing the mast of a ship under full sail?

Most of the time, the answer is no.

REJECTING FATE?

Making this call can be tough, because the call of the random roll is baked into the heart of most RPGs. It's set up as the default way of handling actions and exchanges, so taking the dice out of that equation feels like we're taking something away from the game.

> "By calling for fewer rolls we're making those that do happen more important."

In reality, by calling for fewer rolls we're making those that do happen more important. Frankly, we also help to keep things from becoming frustrating for the players. Rolling to see if something cool (or dangerous!) happens is fun. Rolling a half-dozen times for something fairly trivial gets real old real quick.

Ideally, rolls should only take place if:

- Failure is meaningful
- Success is possible
- The task is genuinely risky
- It makes sense in context

This means that you probably shouldn't ask for a roll...

If Failure Means Nothing

The night is dark, your lookouts don't report any incoming guards and the lock before you is one you've tackled before. On your first try you fail. On the second, you fail again. On the third, another failure. On the fourth, though, it clicks open.

Watching someone make roll after roll after roll with nothing of consequence happening is, frankly, boring. If the players can just keep trying something until they finally succeed and there aren't any repercussions for those failed attempts, just let them have it.



If Success is Impossible

The warrior hunkered down by the edge of the canyon and stretched her calves, breathing in and out as she did so. Then, with a wild yell, she charged and leap into the air. She soared further than anyone could have ever expected, legs kicking out over the void. Indeed, she was almost a quarter of the way across the gap before the plunged to her death.

When you ask for a roll, you're usually saying, "You have a chance." If the players are trying to do something genuinely beyond their abilities don't let them even reach for the dice, because you just know they'll produce some incredible result and then be devastated when you reveal that they failed anyway.

As long as you let them know in advance, however, I do enjoy letting players roll to see quite how badly things go for them.

If the Task is Trivial (For the Character)

Barnaby Scufflepot, famed Oxbridge Scholar, was on the hunt for books on botany – books that he hoped would shed light on the poisons used the malevolent cult his friends were investigating. It was a little embarrassing, however, that despite his decades of experience and the fact that this was his local library, he couldn't locate the section he so desperately searched for…

This one can be a matter of judgement for the GM, with no real hard-and-fast lines. However, being asked to roll for tasks as simple as climbing a short ladder, tossing a pouch of gold to a friend or buying supplies at the going price is infuriating, especially in games where the characters are meant to be larger-than-life heroes.

It's worth remembering that sometimes tasks we might struggle with as fleshy, everyday humans might also be trivial for the characters we're playing. Sure, if I was trying to politely introduce myself to a Phoblaxian ambassador I'd need to make a damn good roll first, but the trained diplomat I'm playing can probably handle it without too much effort.

If the Roll No Longer Makes Sense

"What do you mean you didn't find the trap door? You literally pulled up the rug and stared right at it!"

Sometimes characters do things that render our carefully planned checks utterly obsolete; rather than look for marks on the walls they start yanking on candlesticks until they find the hidden lever.

Are you really going to still make them roll to find the secret door or disarm the trap, just because that's what's written in your notes?

If You're Going to Make them Roll 'Til They Fail

The lake was frozen over with just enough ice to make the crossing possible, but every step was a risk. Which was a pity, because safety was about 200 steps away.

Roll enough times and eventually the dice are going to turn on you – that's just the nature of probability.

If you make your players roll a stealth check for every five feet they move into the castle what you're actually saying is, "This is impossible." When they inevitably produce a terrible result you can't really turn to the group, give a wry smile and say "Bad luck," because luck really didn't have anything to do with it.

VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE – FIFTH EDITION

Dark stories and darker deeds

Designer: White Wolf | **Artist:** Various

425 | 18+ | £40

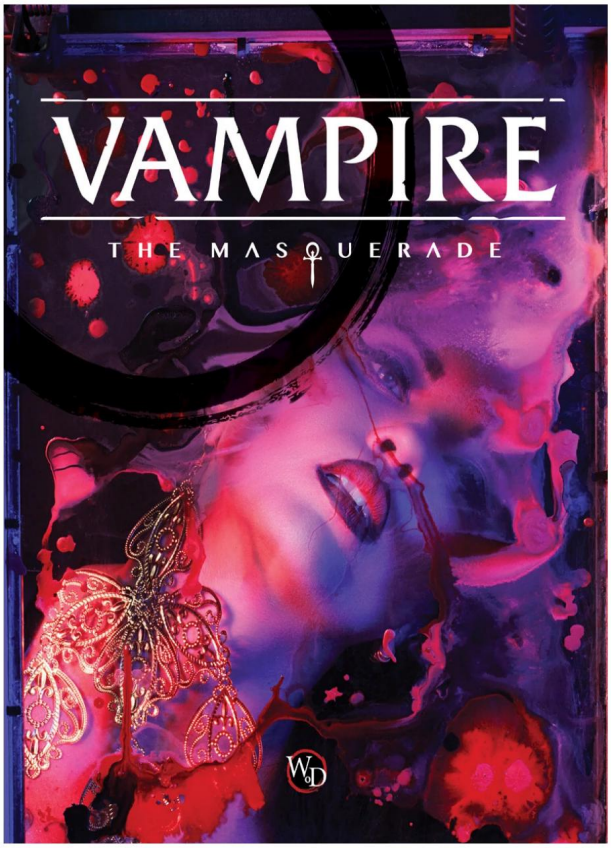
The latest edition of the *Vampire: The Masquerade* roleplaying series is strange and beautiful beast. It's a game with powerful characters but little combat, where a sturdy skeleton of rules supports storytelling over monster-slaying and quests. However, it's also a game that you need to approach carefully.

The core premise puts the players in the shoes – or coffins, perhaps – of a group of vampires living in a slightly twisted version of our own world. While the stories your group plays out could involve everything from battles against vampire hunters to intrigues amidst ivory towers, almost all of them are going to be underpinned by characters' struggles to control the monster within.

This conflict has been at the core of vampire stories for decades, but *Vampire* makes it a particularly bloody one. It is a brutally violent game, with a focus on murder, sex and hedonism that could come across as either laughably immature or downright offensive if handled badly. The core rulebook has a solid section on considerate play and ensuring everyone at the table is comfortable, but even if you follow all the guidelines there will be plenty of folks who are turned off by the idea of playing a character that – at very best – dances the boundary of good and evil.

If you do pull together a group willing and able to delve into the darkness, though, you'll be rewarded with a unique roleplaying experience. Most of the ruleset feels appropriate for a conventional mid-weight RPG, with plenty of special powers and the chance to buy new skills and specialties with experience points, but the tone is much closer to a rules-light storytelling game.

Almost every time the book introduces a mechanic it reminds you that you should ignore it completely if you want, and everything from turn length to who acts first in combat is hand-waved into whatever feels appropriate at the time. There are optional rules for making shootouts and brawls a little deeper but, even so, a lot is left intentionally vague.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... CALL OF CTHULHU

Lovecraftian horror is weird and unsettling, but if you want something more raw and visceral you might enjoy the switch from investigating murders to causing them.



This can seem irritating when you first flick through the rulebook – why bother with so many systems if they aren't important? – but once you hit the table it becomes clear that the more rigid mechanics become both carrot and stick for that core conflict that drives the classic vampire story.

Where a cut-down, improv-heavy ruleset may have a supernatural character roleplay some nebulous consequences for using their powers heavily, in *Vampire* you know that you need to activate your 'uncanny grip' ability to climb that sheer wall, which means making a test to see if your hunger grows. If you get too hungry you risk falling prey to feral instincts – usually manifesting as particularly messy critical successes and bestial failures – or worse, making a conscious choice to bend whatever morals you have left in order to slake your thirst.

By setting down the mechanics in black and white, *Vampire* forces tough choices and dark decisions on both the characters and the people playing them.

The biggest problem with the system, perhaps, is the fact that if you want to run everything by the book it can quickly get rather complicated. This isn't helped by the fact that the raw mechanical impact of a rule or effect is often buried within a longer narrative description, making it hard to pick details out at the table.

Long-term fans may also find that for a game so focused on narrative, there's surprisingly little information on the history of the world and how the setting has changed in this new edition.

Finally, you can't ignore the fact that no matter what precautions you take, playing through a game of *Vampire* can sometimes be an unpleasant experience. There are plenty of RPGs that allow you to play as villains and even monsters, but raising an army of undead to pillage Neverwinter just doesn't generate the same distaste you feel when your character lures a drunken stranger into a London side street.

In many ways, the fact that it can generate visceral horror of this sort is a sign that the game has achieved its goals. *Vampire* isn't for everybody, but if approach it in the right way it can produce stories that you'll remember for years to come – whether you want to or not.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A blood-soaked and brutal game, combining fairly complex rules with a heavy focus on storytelling.



VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - THE FALL OF LONDON

Capital job

Designer: White Wolf Entertainment | 249 | 18+ | £35

The first full campaign for *Vampire: The Masquerade*'s latest edition weaves a haunting story of blood and betrayal intimately bound to the streets and skyscrapers of the capital. At times, however, it feels like the authors rather forgot that *The Fall of London* is meant to be played rather than read.

Honestly, though, this shouldn't really come as too much of a surprise. Throughout its history *V:tM* has been a game that wobbles its way between artistry and indulgence, and in many ways *The Fall of London* is simply following in that tradition.

Perhaps the reason it feels so grating this time around is that the core theme for the campaign, known rather grandly as a 'chronicle', revolves an absolute classic RPG conceit – the fetch quest. Within a few minutes of the game kicking off the party are given a shopping list of five ancient artefacts to retrieve from around London, a handful of potential contacts and a not-so-gentle prod out of the door.

It's not the most inventive plot line out there, but it works rather well as an excuse to get the players exploring the busy streets and interacting with the city's nocturnal inhabitants. This is good, because simply wandering about town and getting to know the area is where *The Fall of London* absolutely excels.

The book simply does an incredible job of seizing on everything that makes the ancient, sprawling capital feel special. It blends fashion-design drama with the mysteries of Roman Britain, drags the players through encounters with punks and aristocracy, and propels them from abandoned tube stations to the most exclusive floors of the Shard.

This all works beautifully thanks to another of *The Fall of London*'s other conceits, which firmly suggests that the players all slip into the coffins of pre-generated characters who have all been unconscious since the 1940s. With this, the players are given free reign to explore the city as strangers, removing any requirement that they already be familiar with either London itself of the wider *V:tM* history.

So many aspects of the book seem designed to make it easy for players and GMs alike to slide easily and comfortably into the campaign. It's a little unfortunate, then, that the heart of the book – the writing – leaves a rake lying in the middle of the road.

The issue isn't that the writing is bad. Indeed, much of it is beautiful and bubbling with dark, bloody imagination. It's just that there's so damn much of it.

For example, somewhere in the middle of the campaign the characters have a chance to run into an enchanting vampiric costume designer who makes her lair in the walls of a theatre. The likely encounter with her is a delightful display of everything that makes *V:tM* great, but the background information on this relatively minor NPC spans about two and a half pages of text.

When you're sitting in your armchair, scanning over the book in preparation for tomorrow's session, this depth is something you can revel in. However, when you get to game night and need to quickly look up a vital nugget of information with actual impact on the adventure, it can be hard to pluck it from the paragraphs detailing how many brothers they had or their dealings with their accountant.

Even in the main body of the adventure, every scene is fleshed out with as much detail and background information as possible, and while this seems like it should help the GM out, the sheer weight of options and facts it presents can instead feel restrictive. Unless your GM is very confident when it comes to picking and choosing which bits of the text to use, you can expect them to spend a rather worrying amount of playtime with their head buried in a book.

There is an argument to be made that this lush, detailed style is something fans expect from *V:tM*, but as a gaming tool it's hard to feel that the book doesn't toe over the line into indulgence.

At its beating heart, *The Fall of London* is a well-crafted story and a beautiful exploration of circles that few other RPGs would cross into. If you're adept at picking your way through walls of prose, or actively prefer the wordier style it's a wonderful way to embrace the night. Possibly, though, you might find it a rather frustrating one.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT PROBABLY

A beautifully bloody exploration of vampiric London, hampered by a bit of overwriting



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... VAMPIRE: THE MASQUERADE - NEW BLOOD STARTER PACK

If you've ripped through the new starter set for V:tM and want to explore something a little meatier, *Fall of London* is a solid place to get your vamp on.

THE HUNGER GAMES

We talk to Andre Novoa, the founder of weird minimalist RPG publisher, Games Omnivorous, about what he's got a taste for

Words by **Christopher John Eggett**



Weird RPGs are having their moment. If what amounts to a homebrew game world becoming the biggest *Dungeons and Dragons* release of the year in the form of *Explorer's Guide to Wildemount*, I think it's safe to say that we're all ready to accept our roleplaying games getting a bit odd. Earlier in the year *MORK BORG* asked us to roll a dice every day to see if the world ends. *Labyrinth* (reviewed on page 80) leans into the weirdness of its source material. The thing that links them all is that they offer very specific worlds with a few key things to lean on that allow players (and DMs) to hook into, whether that's fandom, nostalgia, or the end of the world.

Games Omnivorous is a small publisher of such weird games. There's two growing lines in their stable of games. Minimalist games, and the Manifesto Omnivorous. The first is for publishing minimalist systems like his own *17th Century Minimalist*



HISTORICAL FICTION

"As a historian I've always liked the low fantasy historical genres. And I've always liked the Renaissance and the Baroque eras," says Andre Novoa, the publisher. His first game was his own homebrew that his group had been having fun with, *17th Century Minimalist*. "There are obviously some historical or historically oriented games out there, but none of them quite cover that period in time. I wanted to keep it very low fantasy, with no magic, or at least – there's stuff that could be perceived as magic, but framed as something else, slight of hand or certain treatments. I really wanted to play with beliefs from that era."

The game kind of comes with 'low everything' – including character health. HP in *17th Century Minimalist* does not necessarily increase with levels in the game. "That was the last rule that I designed for the game," says Novoa, "I was play testing the game and I got very bored with HP mountains and combat that takes 40 minutes to resolve. I didn't think that gave a very historical vibe or ambience to the game. I wanted to keep it very deadly."

Character get better at things, but the idea of keeping combat as dangerous as possible just keeps the stakes high when things get nasty. Zero health isn't the end for characters, but it is a bit of an inconvenience.

> "You know, it could be 'the adventure must include a vegetarian' but that doesn't sound as good"

This meshes nicely with one of the key selling points to fans of the time period, flintlock firearms, "When you think about the 17th century and swashbucklers and those kinds of archetypes, you have to include firearms. And it's true, in the 17th century firearms were not that deadly because you would take a shot and most of the time it would just misfire. And you have to draw your sword after that," says Novoa of the unreliable weaponry of the game. This desire to create a dangerous weapon that isn't always going to work for you adds a lot of flavourful choices to the game, "the damage is equivalent to a big weapon. It's not better to use a firearm than certain swords. But they're effective in the sense that your target cannot respond. It makes you think whether you want to go for taking a shot, or if you want to reload."

17th Century Minimalist also offers an adventure pack of mini adventures, usually consisting of a constrained map and a small amount of flavour text, and a few events. Adventures likes Cluster Fuck Inn offer a chaotic series of encounters in a small inn where the GM is encouraged to introduce the next event every seven minutes. Others, like Hedge Death Maze, use an actual 'draw yourself to the centre' mechanic which shows how far each member of the party got before an event happens. The introduction of these 'party game' feeling elements is a big pull of these adventures, and reminds us that we don't always have to be diving deep into a dungeon as part of a multi-decade quest for our heroes. We can just be trying to get the cash and go without being caught, killed, or succumbing to an over-zealous use of leeches to treat a headache.

MARINATED MANIFESTO

Games Omnivorous' other line of adventure books are a little higher minded, or at least, they come with an artistic manifesto.

"We actually based ourselves on Lars von Trier's manifesto," laughs Novoa, "he has these very specific ten rules. So, we thought we'd create an artistic manifest with ten open-ended rules. We tried to tie these to consumption disorders and voracious eaters."

The manifesto itself is then handed out to the writer and designers that Games Omnivorous have a particular admiration for. This same manifesto is then interpreted to wildly differing results, "the books come out very differently," says Novoa, "but they have threads joining them."

The manifesto has some rules designed to keep the game open, and others to tie them together. The first rule of the manifesto for example is 'all books are adventures' and the second is 'the adventures must be system agnostic' – both of these are designed to keep the games from being tied to systems, or being games in their own right, "people should be able to pick whatever rule system that makes the most sense to them," says Novoa. From here the rules take a turn to match more closely the adventures of *17th Century Minimalist.*



"The third rule is that the adventures must take place on earth," says Novoa, "we wanted it to have a geographical fix. This is still open-ended, in *Bring Me Her Bones* time and place is ambiguous, whereas a future release will be played in 1940s Canada with a very precise location." This rule is backed up with there being only one location allowed in the game. Like the swashbuckling adventures of his own game, we're encouraged to experience the chaos and madness of these worlds in confined locations.

The other element is that the creators are allowed a single monster – offering a theme of an overarching threat that, inevitably, our adventurers will get sidetracked away from.

The core of the manifesto however is the strange eating habits that are prescribed. Each much contain elements of saprophagy or osteophagy – the first being the eating of decomposing matter, and the second of eating bones. The adventures must also contain a voracious eater.

"We decided to just come up with the strangest thing you we could within the lines of eating everything. You know, it could be 'the adventure must include a vegetarian' but that doesn't sound as good," says Novoa. The theme adds colour to the adventures they've published that goes beyond the usual 'default' cannibal nastiness when this subject is approach, and includes some off-beat thinking.

SEASON TO TASTE

Bring Me Her Bones is an adventure designed and drawn by Dirk Detweiler Leichty, possibly best known for his illustrations for other's games, in particular *Troika!* which is something of a darling of the weird RPG scene. "The entire module is based on Greek mythology," says Novoa, "so while it's set 'on earth' it is ambiguous about time and place. There's the kidnap of Europa by Zeus and other familiar names that place you somewhere known, even if you're not sure it's earth." The adventure takes place in a kingdom where the ruler, fearing his own mortality and 'the far hells' has turned his worship away from gods and onto something referred to only as The BEAST. This darkness must be appeased by grizzly sacrifices.

This is a world ruled by astrology, and so, there is a function in the game that sees the DM dropping dice over a map to reveal omens based on where they land in combination with the numbers they show. This adds a sandbox element to the adventure which allows players to at first be drawn by treasures, but as they progress, get thrown off toward solving the greater mystery in the sky, or the bloodier murders on earth. It's another example of the small mechanics that turn up in Games Omnivorous games that extends the play beyond the already mysterious draw of rolled dice.

Feast on Titanhead is a darker affair, which makes sense when it's written by Brayden 'Doomscribe' Turenne, "We hired Brayden, who is a heavy meatal drummer for the band Dregmartryr and illustrator based in Vancouver. It's a completely different interpretation. He put himself in there, it's heavy metal, grindcore, weird horror," says Novoa, "there's only one monster and location, but everything seems to *devour*. It's very much a metal horror interpretation."

"Compared to Dirk's, which is elegant and surreal, it's very heavy with all kinds of 'feeding' in it," says Novoa, "and that's what keeps the project interesting, these interpretations." Whereas the world of *Bring Me Her Bones* is somewhere players can inhabit and move through carefully, *Feast on Titanhead* is a rollercoaster ride through hellish mouths and abyssal caverns – surviving is the most your players will hope for.

JUST DESSERTS

The line of weird adventures under the manifesto is growing, with two new books coming out in June this year. Following the two-colour rules both books have striking palettes – one of a bright mustard yellow and black, the other of hot pink and white.

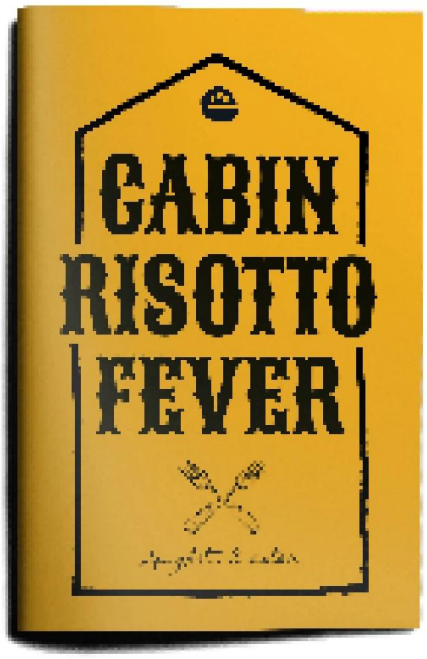
"The first is by an illustrator called Spaghetti Questor. It felt very right to have someone named spaghetti doing something for this line in particular," says Novoa of the Italian

ABOVE From the historical to the weird, Games Omnivorous

RIGHT Exit stage left

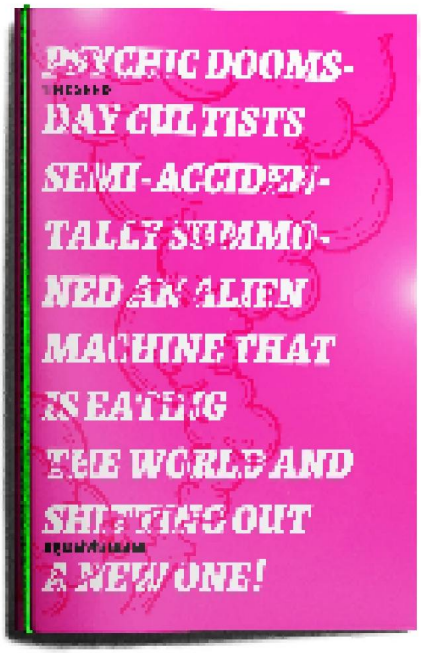


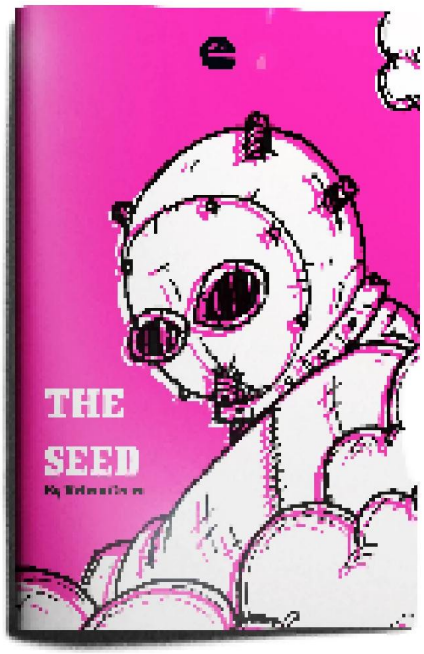




ABOVE The upcoming adventure of Italian illustrator Spaghetti Questor

BELOW Sci-fi in the 17th Century by Kelvin Green





archaeologist and designer whose work sits somewhere between classic etching and more robust woodcuts in style. The module he's created for the manifesto line is called *Cabin Risotto Fever.*

"His interpretation is one where the entire adventure is played around a cabin in the woods in the middle of Canada in 1940. And the entire adventure is a satire of academia and academic life, in fact, one PhD student is actually eaten by his supervisor," says Novoa. This is the first adventure module that the illustrator is signing as a writer as well, having previously worked on some design elements for *Exhalted Funeral.*

The second book, *The Seed*, is by well-known RPG module writer Kelvin Green whose main body of work consists of grizzly (and sometimes historical) modules for the mostly gruesome (and sometimes problematic) *Lamentations of a Flame Princess.* "As a gamer myself, I've played all of his modules before, I simply adored them – they're very elegant – and it's a pleasure to work with him." This adventure is the electrified pink and the inner cover pitches the game perfectly: 'psychic doomsday cultists semi-accidentally summoned and alien machine that is eating the world and shitting out a new one!" Despite the sci-fi pitch, it's actually set in the 17th Century, so could in theory be played very happily with the in-house system.

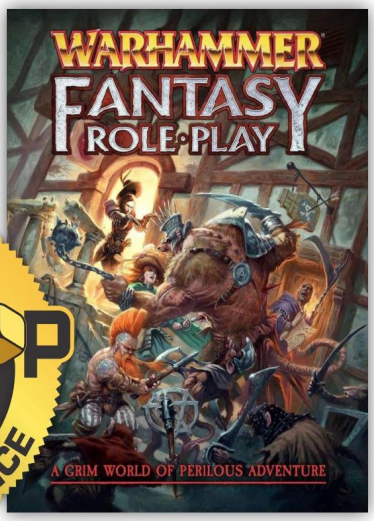
AMUSE-BOUCHE AHEAD

The line of weird stuff doesn't stop with these adventures however. There's a third set of strange objects to be found in the Games Omnivorous store, and these are slightly more supplemental in nature. The first is an LP, yes, that's right, a vinyl record. Novoa explains, "I've been thinking about this LP for three years now. As an amateur musician it's just been something I've been thinking about for a long time, and finally last year I found the right person to do it with." That person was Manuel Pinheiro, a seasoned musician and sound engineer from Portugal who works with London's Vic theatre, taking a show to broadway and is in numerous Portuguese bands. Manel was the man to bring the LP to life as *Death Robot Jungle.*

"We think of it as our major release as it's the strangest, and it's a completely unique thing in the RPG world," explains Novoa, "we call it a tropical RPG setting, which is the genre we're playing – which we also kind of made up. The LP is gatefold and doubles up as a game master screen, and inside you have a minimalist explanation for the setting to use with the rules of your choosing. We think of it like how an RPG setting is a book – right? And you read, you know, 100, 200, 300 pages of a book to learn about the creatures and the affections and the gods and the politics and the cultural aspects of that setting. In our case you hear the music and you try to imagine these things. You imagine the creatures that you have in this world, the kinds of smells and textures and dangers and threats and exploration sites. It's a very conceptual."

For a more fleshed out carapace of creatures, see the recently Kickstarted *The Insectiary* – a weird and nasty collection of insects that might just turn up to ruin an omnivores picnic.





tabletop GAMING
EDITOR'S CHOICE

WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: FOURTH EDITION

New experiences in the Old World

Designer: Cubicle 7 team | **Artist:** Various

320 | 11+ | £45

The dark forests and bloodstained battlefields of the *Warhammer Fantasy* world feel strangely comfortable again, thanks to a solid new ruleset that nudges the *WFRP* system into the modern age without losing its old familiar feel.

Gamers across the lands have been using one form or another of the RPG to stomp around *Warhammer*'s Old World for more than 30 years now, and there is something delightfully old-school about the feel of this new edition. Players are encouraged to randomly roll on tables to build their characters, magic is dangerously powerful and death is only ever one (un)lucky roll away. However, a lot has been done to clean up and simplify the rules wherever possible, creating a game that flows nicely once you get it on the table.

If there's a criticism to be had it's that there's nothing particularly unique in terms of either rules or setting – but, honestly, that's pretty much what you want out of a *Warhammer* game. The world itself has been freely borrowing from all kinds of fantasy tropes for going on 40 years – or at least it did until the official timeline was wrapped up a few years ago – and in turn has inspired countless imitators and offshoots.

Between the haughty High Elves and demonic hordes, perhaps the most standout aspect of *WFRP* is where it pitches its action. Even experienced characters fall well short of the incredible, reality-bending heroics that exemplify high-powered heroic fantasy games, but it doesn't try to capture the desperation that comes from gritty, realistic titles either.

In fact, it's perfectly positioned for telling the kind of stories that *Warhammer Fantasy* fans want to create, where the heroes somehow manage to pull off incredible deeds despite being wildly outnumbered and/or horribly outmatched. It fits into a world where the violence and danger mean an errant blade might take off your warrior's hand but, rather than ending your career, you'll probably just bolt an axe to the stump and be on the frontlines a few days later.

That does assume, however, that you and your friends decide to play as warriors, rather than rat-catchers, bankers and servants.

This brings us neatly to the 'lifepath' system, which encourages players to randomly roll up everything from their stats to their species. While this is great fun and can certainly produce interesting results, it has an unfortunate habit of spitting out normal, everyday people rather than adventurers.

In many other games this wouldn't be a problem, but in a world so stuffed with combat that they stuck 'war' in the name it really feels like being a lawyer should be a background feature or origin story. Instead, it can end up being something that determines your character's skills and level progression until you pay a hefty price to move to another career.

This is a fairly minor gripe, of course, and it doesn't even need to be a problem if handled properly, but it does create a trap that inexperienced parties could easily fall into.

In any case, once you get out of the gates and stuck into adventures, things get a lot smoother. Basic skill and ability checks are handled with a d100 system that will feel instantly familiar to fans of *WFRP*'s first or second editions, though even newcomers should be able to get the hang of things within a couple of rounds.

There's a slight variation on the rules for more complex tests that adds in degrees of success (or failure) rather than a binary pass/fail result. The mechanic is just similar enough to the core one that it can leave players staring at dice trying to remember what kind of check they're making, but once a session is into its stride these issues fade into the background.

One of the areas where the complex rolls come to the forefront is in combat, which is a fast and furious affair that can be deadly if approached lightly. A neat advantage system means that every successful attack, parry and manoeuvre adds an extra bonus to your rolls, giving a real sense of momentum carrying the battle back and forth.

This all contributes to building up a system that does exactly what it set out to do. There are a few minor niggles here and there, but if you've ever had an urge to ride through the Reikland and go hunt some chaos cultists, *WFRP*'s fourth edition is the ideal place to start.

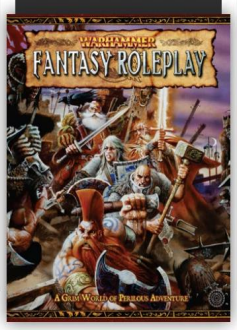
RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

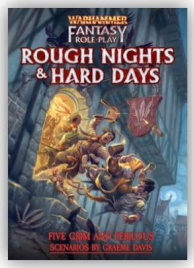
As comfortable as an old jumper, as dark as the depths of space. A real return to form for the venerable series.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: SECOND EDITION

Many longterm fans of the series were put off by the sweeping changes that came with the third edition, but this latest effort is a real return to form.



WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: ROUGH NIGHTS & HARD DAYS



Capers and carnage in the world of Warhammer

Designer: Graeme Davis, Andy Law, Ben Scerri | **Artist:** Various

95 | 13+ | £24

You may not think that the tangled plotlines and noble dramas of Shakespearean comedy would fit in with the blood-soaked darkness of the *Warhammer Fantasy* RPG, but *Rough Nights & Hard Days* somehow manages to pull it off, blending drunken barons, masked lovers and murderous rat-men into a series of enjoyable – if slightly messy – adventures.

The first campaign of *WFRP*'s fourth edition, the book is divided up into five adventures that can theoretically be plundered for one-off quests but slot together into a cohesive whole. What starts off as a chance meeting with a noblewoman's retinue in a roadside tavern pulls the party into a series of parties, weddings and formal duels, every one of which is interrupted by up to a half-dozen side-plots that all compete for the spotlight.

The opening adventure, for example, has a main thread revolving around a fateful run-in with the party's future employer and the murder of her champion fighter. At the same time, however, the noblewoman's lawyer is quarrelling with some villainous old companions, a local noble is facing the consequences of his philandering ways and a band of smugglers are running into difficulties with their unwilling cargo. Oh, and a charming pickpocket is running about the place, stealing whatever he can and generally being a distraction.

If that sounds like a lot of plates to keep in the air, that's because it is. Each of these threads could probably be spun out into their own adventure without too much difficulty, and keeping track of who's doing what and where everything is requires a solid amount of both preparation and improvisation on the GM's side.

When things flow smoothly, however, the mishmashed plots and activities filling the room create a wonderful feeling of vitality. The intentionally messy nature proceedings create the illusion of a living, breathing world where people are always scheming and acting on their own, regardless of whether the players pay attention to them or not.

In order to help you keep track of events the bulk of every adventure is broken up into short, time-stamped paragraphs that tell you what happens throughout the day. This does an admirable job of providing a rather solid script to plan around, but it does all come across as rather prescriptive. Confident and experienced GMs will probably be happy to take them as the suggestions that they truly represent, but if you're new it can be incredibly daunting if – or, more likely, when – the players' actions throw things wildly off course.

Even with these reservations factored in, the adventures are still incredibly fun and well-worth a look from any *WFRP* group. However, the decision of whether to use the book as a campaign or a handful of isolated adventures is an unexpectedly tricky one.

If you just looked at the plot and the events that drive it forward, it seems pretty clear that you could run the entire thing from end-to-end without too much difficulty. This makes things easy for the GM and allows them to get the most out of the themes and characters that punctuate the entire collection – so why would you ever choose to split them up?

The biggest issue is one of repetition. This seems like an odd complaint for a book so stuffed with ideas and imagination, but the problem isn't with the content of the various adventures so much as their tone. Every one of them follows the same rough structure and, despite their differences in the broad strokes, the deluge of side-plots and distractions starts feeling rather familiar once you've been through a couple of them.

Again, this is an issue that can be side-stepped with a bit of confidence and gusto from the GM. Nothing specifies that the adventures need to take place directly after one another and the lengthy gaps between engagements can take the form of more straightforward palate cleansers drawn from other sources.

Rough Nights & Hard Days is a solid recommendation for any *WFRP* fans looking to mix up their games or launch an interesting campaign. It can be daunting at times, and players looking for simple punch-ups and battles may get frustrated with the complex plots and scheming getting in the way of their fun, but when it works well it can kick off some wonderful roleplaying.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

A slice of high-society farce mixed with *Warhammer Fantasy*'s ink-black humour and bloodlust that isn't the simplest campaign out there, but is among the most entertaining.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS RPG

Though their tone couldn't be further apart, the courtly dramas of *L5R* are strangely similar to those in *Rough Nights & Hard Days*. Though with fewer samurai and many more rat-men.







ROMANCE OF THE PERILOUS LAND

The Best of Quests

Designer: Scott Malthouse / Osprey Games

255+ | 13+ | £25

Between the knights, mages and monsters there's very little in *Romance of the Perilous Land* that hasn't already been tackled by countless other fantasy RPGs, but its sheer commitment to British folklore manages to create something both incredibly charming and thoroughly playable.

This is rather impressive, as the elevator pitch for the game – an Arthurian spin on a 20-year-old *Dungeons & Dragons* ruleset – doesn't sound all that appealing. It's only when you crack open the rulebook and plough through the rules that you realise there's a lot more creativity on display than first meets the eye.

Let's start with the setting itself. The titular Perilous Land is very much a stand in for the British Isles and while its stories are all formed around a core of King Arthur, Merlin and the knightly heroism that surrounds them, this is far from the only myth that's been mined to make the world. Robin Hood and his Merry Men are a major in-game faction, for example, and listed among the bestiary are creatures as well-known as brownies and an obscure as the enormous dun cow.

There's a genuine love of folklore running through every page of *Romance of the Perilous Land* and while not everyone will recognise the references and allusions, they nevertheless combine into a world that begs for exploration. There is an expectation that the GM is pretty comfortable with folklore-ey tropes to get things running smoothly, but it's hard to imagine anybody picking up the game without at least being interested in these kinds of stories in the first place.



The other sizable chunk of creativity surfaces in the rules themselves, which – despite having their core based on *D&D* – feel really rather distinct and surprisingly streamlined.

Part of this can probably be attributed to the fact that a lot of the more reality-warping powers and spells found in more traditional fantasy RPGs don't really fit in with *Romance of the Perilous Land*'s ethos. It's a world where brave knights duel with dragons and cunning mages weave spells that can raise the dead, but not one where characters can expect to be casually teleporting their way across the battlefield or shaping the face of reality with the wave of a wand.



This all contributes to a stripped-down magic system that players should be able to grasp in a matter of minutes and a limited number of choices available when your heroes level up. For some the slim list of options will be a mark against the game, but there's no denying that it makes things incredibly easy to pick up and play.

The game's overall focus on simplicity and mid-weight magic bleeds over into the mechanics too. Different types of armour don't make characters or monsters harder to hit, for example, but instead absorb damage over the course of a fight. This has the twin benefits of cutting down on mid-battle maths and also allowing heroes to fight their way through several life-threatening bouts per day without relying on endless sources of magical healing to explain away the wounds.

Of course, while this isn't the highest of high fantasy, it isn't exactly striving for realism either. *Romance of the Perilous Land* isn't a game that cares too much about simulating ancient combat or revelling in the mud and blood of gritty battlefield horror, and if you go in expecting to look over a chart of which polearms excel at fighting cavalry, you're going to be disappointed.

Instead of seeking to seize one extreme or another, it sits warmly in the middle, comfortably nestled down in a collection of fantasy tropes and old stories that most of us have internalised so completely we forget where we heard them in the first place. It's not a game that's likely to blow any minds or revolutionise the RPG scene, but it's a fun, easy-to-handle way to while away a rainy afternoon with friends – ideally with an open fire crackling away in the background.

If you have any interest in British folklore *Romance of the Perilous Land* is a treasure trove of interesting ideas and fresh takes on old stories. And if you don't – even if you aren't from the British Isles – it's a fun mid-weight fantasy setting to play through; one packed with weird creatures and brave heroes.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

A surprisingly slick fantasy RPG that neatly blends Arthurian myth with regional legends from across Britain.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... KING ARTHUR PENDRAGON

Romance of the Perilous Land is just as in love with myth as Greg Stafford's knightly classic, but is a tad more flexible in its approach



CTHULHU DARK AGES

The hard times of old England

Designer: Chaosium

270 | 13+ | £38

Gamers from across the globe can testify that facing down *Call of Cthulhu*'s eldritch abominations with little more than an old service revolver and a wind-up torch can shake you to your soul. Now imagine doing the same thing, except with an iron dagger in place of a gun and the torch switched out for the flickering light of a burning taper.

This is the world of *Cthulhu Dark Ages*, which aims to capture all the horrors of H.P. Lovecraft's conveniently copyright-free creations and translate them to the wild woods and dirty streets of 10th century England. The result is something fascinating and eminently readable, though it's a little tricky to picture the table that will take full advantage of the writers' obvious love for the real-world history.

In fairness, though, there is rather a lot of this love on display. Huge sections of the rulebook are dedicated to giving both GMs and players a crash-course in living and dying like an Anglo-Saxon, ranging from details about literacy through to a rather lengthy list of period-appropriate popes (and occasional antipopes).

As you might expect, the absence of anything spookier than the threat of excommunication can make the raw history a little dry in places. However, it says a lot about the quality of the writing that even those of us without a burning passion for the period can leaf through the book and almost accidently absorb a smattering of details.

It helps that Lovecraftian horror translates rather well to the dark ages. The idea of ever-present corruption and rot meshes quite neatly into a world so concerned with plagues and crop failures. On top of this, there really is something rather special about taking on tentacled monsters with so few of the meagre advantages held by more modern investigators. There are no convenient university libraries to consult, no rich uncles waiting at the end of a telegraph line and no last-resort sticks of dynamite sitting somewhere in the heroes' backpacks. Instead you get burning torches, iron blades and whatever knowledge might be sitting in the local monastery.

While it might seem like this would make every game of *Cthulhu Dark Ages* an exercise in futility and early death, the rules are more-or-less balanced to keep investigations highly dangerous but not suicidal. While you could certainly choose to turn things into a gritty slog where the entire team is laid low by infections every other session, there's no obligation to run things this way.

As far as the rest of the rules go, it probably says rather a lot that we've gotten so far through the review without mentioning them.

The game bases the core of its ruleset around the latest edition of *Call of Cthulhu*, which has been merrily plodding along with the same framework of simple percentage-based skills for a few decades now. This feeds into a system that's simple to grasp – roll under the score, and you succeed – but not terribly exciting or particularly tied into the game's themes.

Of course, few people flock to Lovecraftian horror for the complex or highly honed game systems, but rather for the mysteries, the unsettling air of dread and the setting itself. Here, we run into another potential sticking point with *Cthulhu Dark Ages* – the possibility that players might struggle to spot the instant appeal of a small village in the Midlands.

This is especially true when it's so directly contrasted with the opportunities to explore the cocktail parties and jazz clubs so popular in *Call of Cthulhu*'s default timeframe of the roaring 20s. Getting the most out of the game still requires a group that genuinely enjoys the historical details of the book, and that can be a rather tricky thing to find.

Tricky, though, isn't quite the same as impossible. If you can find a group that bonds over their ability to correctly pronounce Æthelflæd you're onto a real winner. Heck, even if you can't entire your friends into a multi-year campaign, *Cthulhu Dark Ages* is still a great book to read through and a wonderful tool for spicing up your more conventional Lovecraftian games.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

Come for the chance to stab abominations with pointy sticks, stay for the loving guide to dark ages England



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... *CALL OF CTHULHU*

It's a shade obvious, but outside of history nuts the ideal audience for *Cthulhu Dark Ages* is the experienced investigator looking for a new twist on all the old Lovecraftian tropes

READING THE ROOM

The stage was set for a climatic, explosive showdown. Our heroes had been very keen to advertise the opening night of their new tavern and that had given their enemies plenty of time to plan a devastating attack that would turn the party into a bloodbath.

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Osprey Games**

There were devils and demons waiting in the wings, a whole squadron of assassins and thugs lurking in the sewers and even a dragon preparing for a fly-by firebombing. Things were planned so that the heroes would get a brief warning at around midnight, and within a few minutes their shiny new tavern would be a warzone.

Of course, they wouldn't be alone in facing these horrible threats. The party had plenty of allies who had been invited to the opening night celebrations, including several old adventuring buddies that could help them out against the monstrous hordes. The showdown was going to be epic, brutal and bloody.

Except it never happened.

As midnight approached all the villains' plans faded away like morning mist and their minions slunk their way back into the shadows. The attack was cancelled, or – more accurately – had suddenly never existed in the first place.

The reason for this is that our brave heroes, who had spent several nights planning the grand party, were just having too much fun. They were chatting with old allies, scheming plans up with local dignitaries and fumbling their way through awkward romantic sub-plots.

It wasn't the most dramatic or dangerous way for the evening to play out, but it was certainly the most satisfying. There were no stabbings or explosions, but there was plenty of chatter and laughter that had a greater impact on the world than any dragon-fire out there.

The only challenges the party faced that night were the arm-wrestling contests, and it was glorious.

TALKING POINTS

One of the most time-consuming and difficult aspects of GMing a game is all the planning. Unless you're an absolute genius at improvisation you're probably going to spend a decent amount of time staring at a notebook or an empty word doc, trying to think up what your players are going to run into tonight.

Hell, even if you're running a game from a published adventure or campaign, you still need to take the time to glance over the areas your party are likely to visit over the next few hours.

With this time and effort already expended, it can sometimes be hard to deal with things when they don't work out quite the way you planned.

Sometimes this inflexibility can lead to the dreaded railroading – forcing the party down one specific path that you thought of and slamming the door on all other choices – but even if you avoid this pitfall you can easily find yourself playing out a session that just doesn't fit what the table wants at this particular moment.

> "It can sometimes be hard to deal with things when they don't work out quite the way you planned"

WAR & PEACE

Perhaps the most common way for this to crop up is when you make the decision to include combat or neatly cut it out.

This might sound very simple, but when so many games are almost entirely structured around the assumption that you're going to thump some bad guys at some point throughout the evening it can be hard to make the call to ditch a planned-out battle entirely.

However, it's always good to remember that combat isn't always what fits the current story or mood of the room. Sometimes the party just wants to talk and gamble for the evening without squaring off against a tavern full of thugs, or carry out their careful negotiations with a Klingon ambassador without being pulled into a ritual duel to "prove their worth".

On top of this, there's the simple fact that (in most games, anyway) combat really eats into your playtime. If you only have a half-hour left to play it can make sense to ditch a final battle and wrap things up neatly, rather than end on a mid-combat cliff-hanger.

It can be hard to gauge when to drop a planned-out fight, but if people are taking pains to avoid a fight that's within their weight class you might want to ask if you're including it because it's fun, or because that's what your notes/the adventure says should happen.

Of course, sometimes things swing back the opposite way entirely. Occasionally you'll have a session of grand roleplaying planned out, only to find that everyone at your table has had a bad day at work and just wants to let off steam by dropping fireballs on some objectively evil cultists.

These are situations where random encounter tables and improvised street-fights are king. In an ideal world every single fight the party runs into should be meaningful and important, but sometimes you need to let the big story threads dangle a little and remember than smacking bad guys around the place can be just be fun.

SAVING FOR RAINY DAYS

It would be a lie to claim that having to ditch planned-out plot points for the sake of a smooth gaming session is always easy. The mighty battle at the tavern's opening night was something I'd been working on for a while and had spent time sketching out in detail.

However, just because I didn't use all that material at the first possible juncture doesn't mean that it's lost. I still have it all hanging around in my notebook, and when the party next leave themselves open to attack… well, let's just say they'd better hope those old friends are still hanging around nearby.

This is, perhaps, one of the great joys of tabletop RPGs. Nothing we ever cut out is lost forever, and when we need to slip something in at the last minute that encounter with the smuggler you skipped over six months ago is just waiting to go. And hey, maybe you can change the names so they sound close to your buddy's boss the next time they have a miserable day at work.



THE SECOND AGE

Lord of the Rings RPG The One Ring is taking players on another unexpected journey in its second edition. Producer Emmet Byrne and Dominic McDowall lead the way as the game and its Middle-earth enter a new era

Words by **Matt Jarvis**



Smaug's dragon fire is extinguished. The dust kicked up by the Battle of Five Armies has settled. The shadow in the east lies quiet – for the time being – and the One Ring that will spark the War of the Ring 60 years later remains undiscovered in the possession of Bilbo Baggins.

This was the unfamiliar Middle-earth that players found themselves in when *The One Ring: Adventures over the Edge of the Wild* arrived on the tabletop in 2011. Set five years after *The Hobbit* and decades before *The Lord of the Rings*, the roleplaying game allowed players to explore first-hand an era of Tolkien's world they'd never seen before and embark on their own quests alongside a fellowship of adventurers.

In the years and supplements that followed (including a revision to the core rulebook in 2014), *The One Ring* journeyed across Middle-earth in adventures that spanned more than three decades in the game's setting. From its starting region of Rhovanion – the landscape travelled by Bilbo Baggins towards the end of *The Hobbit*, and explored in the RPG's early books – the game ventured further afield to the likes of Rivendell, Rohan and Bree, introducing rules for dwarves, dragons, Riders of Rohan and more inhabitants of Middle-earth along the way.

"Back in 2011, we'd planned to release a series of core games, each moving the timeline forward and presenting refinements of the game system," reveals Dominic McDowall, CEO of *The One Ring* publisher Cubicle 7. "To our delight, the game system didn't need much in the way of refinement after it was out in the wild, so we ditched that plan – the last thing we'd want is to make people buy the same game more than once!"

Now, almost a decade later, its finally time for *The One Ring*'s gameplay and world to move on in its upcoming second edition.

"We never want to rush into new editions but now, eight years of playtesting further on, we have lots of new things we want to do with the game system in a second edition," says McDowall.

IN THE DARKNESS BIND THEM

The One Ring's second edition advances the RPG's starting timeline almost 20 years, towards the coming War of the Ring, Sauron's defeat and the end of the Third Age.

It's now been 25 years since Smaug was defeated, and Sauron's growing strength is beginning to set in motion the events of *Lord of the Rings*. With the relative peace of the first edition hardening once again into an uneasy tension, McDowall says the second edition adopts a more sombre tone in its adventures.

"The tone of the game darkens as you approach the War of the Ring, and as you move further into the realms of men the politics takes on a harder edge," he comments. "Gondor is a prize worth fighting for, by fair means or foul, and of course the Dark Lord's plans play on human weaknesses and desires to twist people to his bidding."

The players are spurred to action by the steward of Gondor, forming a party that will find itself directly involved in the mounting drama that will lead to the War of the Ring. The kingdom of Men plays a major role in the first adventures for second edition, including Gondor-set campaign *The Errantries of the King* and a guide to the city and lands of Minas Tirith.

"Gondor is a big focus for this phase of the game, and there's so much good stuff to dig into there," McDowall says. "We're taking an in-depth look at the various parts of the realm, and the internal and external conflicts besetting it."

The second edition starter set, meanwhile, explores the region of the Misty Mountains – including an encounter between the heroes and giants.

"We'll be revisiting some areas only loosely covered previously, and as we detail more of the setting we'll introduce some wide-ranging adventures taking you across Middle-earth," McDowall says.



One previously unexplored area finally seeing the light of day is the mines of Moria, in upcoming adventure *The Long Dark*. First announced back in 2017, the long-awaited scenario set in the dwarven realm of Khazad-dûm deep beneath the Misty Mountains has since been confirmed to be coming to the new game.

"Once we decided that the second edition of the game was necessary, we needed to move our projects in development so that they would come out afterwards, otherwise they would instantly be seen as being for the old edition," McDowall explains. "Moria is going to be a wonderful and enormous campaign and setting, we can't wait!"

RING CLEAR

The One Ring producer Emmet Byrne hesitates to call second edition's gameplay 'streamlined' compared to first edition.

"Streamlined is probably the wrong word to use as people often think 'streamlined' means something has been dumbed down," he explains. "I prefer to think of it as ironing out wrinkles. The first edition went under stringent playtesting but that is nothing compared to having thousands of people play your game and send that feedback to you."

McDowall opts instead for 'elegant': "We were keen to make the game as elegant as possible, without sacrificing any of the satisfying depth. In some places we've reduced the number of dice rolls to resolve a specific situation, for example."

Whatever you call it, second edition's rules – developed by original co-designer Francesco Nepitello, who also co-created board game epic *War of the Ring* – have been significantly reworked to make the RPG faster and easier to play.

Players create their characters using a 'culture' and 'calling' – the equivalent of a race and class in other RPGs. There are 11 different cultures, from the high elves of Rivendell to rangers of the north, each with its own place in the world.

"A lot of the cultures are very close to those seen in first edition, with minor adjustments," says Byrne. "There have been slight changes to some backgrounds, and some tweaks to cultural blessings to ensure every culture feels on par with the others but other than that we've tried to keep the cultures as close as possible to first edition to aid players converting their characters over."

Callings define a character's skills and speciality, but also set out their reason for adventuring. This movation is broken into a positive aspiration, which helps the character to overcome tough challenges by pursuing their goal, and a negative weakness, which makes them vulnerable to the corrupting force of Middle-earth's creeping darkness – even when the One Ring is nowhere in sight.

"Callings themselves have undergone somewhat of change, with your calling having a greater impact on your character," says Byrne. "Each calling has something that drove them to become an adventure, be it glory, knowledge or the search for something lost. The darkside of this drive can lead you down a path to ruin and it is what the Shadow can use to warp and twist you. We saw some of this with Shadow Weakness in first edition, and we have expanded on it in second edition."

One of second edition's biggest changes is to dice rolls. When attempting a task, players are still aiming to hit a target number with a number of dice, as in first edition. What's new is how those targets are calculated; rather than letting the DM-like loremaster choose a target as before, second edition uses a character's attributes to set a base number, which the loremaster can then modify according to difficulty. The change makes characters' traits feel more important, and the game faster to play overall.

"With second edition we looked at where parts of the game may have slowed down more than we

liked or created dissonance during play," Byrne says. "Thankfully there weren't many of these instances!"

It's a similar case with journeys, *The One Ring*'s distinctive moments of travelling across the expanse of Middle-earth. Previously roll-heavy, journeys now see the loremaster roll for each three days spent travelling, resolving events based on the terrain and the result of their dice. Players might get lost, discover a shortcut or even end up in danger .

"Journeys was something we wanted to revisit," Byrne says. "Though it worked very well, it involved a lot of dice rolls to resolve a journey."

Another distinctly Tolkien-esque addition is councils, a reimagining of first edition's encounters. The chance for players to engage in their own council of Elrond-like meeting with Middle-earth's mightiest individuals, the rules have been loosened to let players chat with the everyday inhabitants of the setting using just their basic skills.

"Encounters – now councils – was another area we wanted to address," Byrne says. "The initial goal was to provide guidelines and a framework for how social encounters would work, but in play these often ended up being used as strict rules."

As you'd expect, there's plenty of clashing of swords and slaying of orcs, too. Characters adopt different stances during combat to gain bonus dice for their rolls, working with their companions to use their abilities for maximum effect. Players' limited pool of hope points can still be spent to gain roll bonuses, but the game has been refocused to make exploring and interacting just as vital and viable as swinging a sword around.

"We found that a lot of players hoarded hope until combat," Byrne says. "We've tried to alleviate that to some extent and incentivise using hope elsewhere during play. Likewise, combat stances have been tweaked as at a certain level of competence most people only ever used the defensive stance."

"Playtest feedback on new developments always needs lots of follow-on work," adds McDowall. "Changing things like how hope works has a knock on effect in other areas, such as the balance between rewards and virtues. So you fix that, and then fix the fixes, and chase all those unintended consequences out of the game."

While second edition features many brand new ideas and rules, it's also been an opportunity to collect together almost a decade's worth of additions to first edition in one place, making it easy for newcomers to get up to speed.

"There are other mechanics that, while not new to the system, are new to the core," Bryne says. "For example, we've taken the rules for boats, horses, and magical treasures that were spread across three different supplements and now included these in the core. This might feel like a small change but knowing that these are in the core, and that players and loremasters definitely have access to them, means that our future adventures and supplements can make full use of them."

THE NEXT AGE

The One Ring may be moving forward, but it's not leaving everything behind. Characters and adventures from first edition – whether player-made or official releases – can be converted to the new game's ruleset by adjusting target numbers and journeys.

"One of the most important things was to ensure that our previous supplements would be compatible with the new edition," Bryne says. "Our loyal fans have been with us since the start and have amassed large collections of supplements and adventures for *The One Ring*. It was important to us that those previous supplements work with the second edition with minimal adjustments."

The new edition also means more content for *Adventures in Middle-earth*, the *Dungeons & Dragons*-compatible version of the game that's seen many of *The One Ring*'s adventures brought over – and which also influenced second edition's own development.

"It means lots more content to be brought from *TOR* to *AIME*!" McDowall comments on what second edition means for *Adventures in Middle-earth*. "*AIME* takes the approach to the lore that *TOR* developed and adapts it for [*D&D*] *5E* – as successful as *TOR* was for us, we were aware that some groups don't want learn a new ruleset, they want to keep using the *D&D* they know and love. Being able to bring Middle-earth to them with the *AIME* 5E setting was fantastic. And then that came full circle as the development of *AIME* contributed ideas we took into second-edition *TOR*."

Second edition may bring *The One Ring* closer to *The Lord of the Rings* but, as the game's first edition proved, there's no chance of Middle-earth running out of stories anytime soon. The adventure isn't over yet.





THE ONE RING RPG: OATHS OF THE RIDDERMARK

Life and death in the saddle

Designer: Cubicle 7 team | **Artist:** Various

2+ £25

If you've read through or watched the *Lord of the Rings*, there are probably a few things you already associate with the Kingdom of Rohan; chiefly horses, excellent hair and huge piles of dead orcs. While there's no shortage of any of those in *Oaths of the Riddermark*'s half-dozen adventures, you may be a little surprised at all the politics and courtly intrigue that need to be navigated in the lands of the horse-lords.

The slim book is designed to work with Cubicle 7's *The One Ring Roleplaying Game,* though the company says that a version for its *Adventures in Middle-Earth* sibling game is in the works, and falls somewhere between a simple series of themed adventures and a full-blown campaign. This puts it in a good spot for players and GMs that want to get their hands on something with a bit more substance than random questing, but can't quite commit to a game that could take several long months or even years to reach its climax.

Indeed, the individual adventures are distinct enough from one another that a gaming group could easily dip in and out as they please, playing through one or two before moving on entirely.

If you run right through all of them one after the other, however, you'll find that the story smoothly builds up in scope and danger, starting with a hunt for a horse-eating monster and ending with a battle that could decide the fate of the kingdom. This is undoubtedly the best way to use the book, allowing the GM to weave recurring characters in and out as they please.

Much of these characters will be based around the major thread running through the adventure, which sees the party working for King Thengal (the father of Theoden from *The Lord of the Rings*) as he attempts to bully two rival lords of Rohan into ending a vicious feud before the forces of darkness rise. The adventure in which this arc is introduced, *Red Days Rising*, is based around arranging a marriage between two childhood friends now divided between the families, and acts as a great example of *Oaths of the Riddermark*'s major themes.

While the heroes will get to hack up a few bandits on their way to securing the wedding, if they charge into every situation with the aim of battering it into submission they're going to run into hot water pretty quickly. Actually succeeding on all their goals needs more than a little diplomacy and discussion, all of which opens up easy paths for roleplaying.

All this talking and negotiating does mean that the GM needs to be on point and have a good grasp of the entire adventure before settling down for a session, but the writing is usually snappy enough that the information on hand isn't too overwhelming. Keeping track of all the names can be a bit of a chore, but most hardcore Tolkien fans should already be pros when it comes to separating their Erkenbrands from their Éogars.

While the story is well-plotted and has the potential to give successful parties some truly fantastic moments – without wishing to spoil anything, the climax definitely rewards them earlier good deeds – the framing device for virtually every adventure requires at least a bit of railroading. Though it's entirely possible for the GM to allow the adventurers to explore Rohan in-between each major plot point, eventually they're going to have to end up meeting with the king once more.

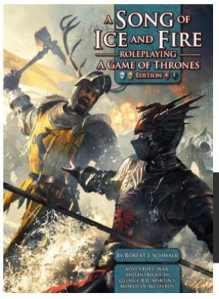
The main plot is compelling enough that isn't going to be a problem for most groups, but if the main appeal of the *Lord of the Rings* for your players were the bits where orcs got diced up by Viggo Mortensen, they're probably going to struggle to enjoy *Oaths of the Riddermark*.

If, however, you're playing with the kind of group that loves careful diplomacy, courtly intrigue and thinking their way out of a problem when stabbing it won't work, it might be the book to keep your sessions going for a couple of thoroughly enjoyable months.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A series of well-crafted adventures with an emphasis on both brains and brawn.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... A SONG OF ICE & FIRE ROLEPLAYING

If you love classic low-magic fantasy with a focus on politics and intrigue, but are less keen on the nasty bits, *Oaths* could be your ideal campaign.

FANTASY AGE COMPANION

Designer: Jack Norris, Chris Pramas, Steve Kenson, Jon Leitheusser, Malcolm Sheppard

129 | 13+ | £20

Just as the base game had almost exactly what you would expect from a sword-and-sorcery RPG – for better and for worse – the *Fantasy AGE Companion* is stuffed with new options and rules that are a little predictable but no less welcome for it.

Much of the focus is on adding characters and ideas that aren't embedded in the heart of the fantasy genre quite as firmly as elves and wizards, but nevertheless crop up often enough to be recognisable tropes.

For example, the new races on offer all fall into the slightly contradictory category of typical non-typical heroes. This means there are rules for playing as humanoid dragons, the clockwork- or steam-powered constructs known as Oreans, and a whole array of bestial humanoids based on everything from bears to frogs.

The new talents and specialisations are also designed to allow characters to branch out of the typical Tolkien-esque mould with rogues that specialise in breaking heads with nunchaku and kicks that would put Bruce Lee to shame, and warriors that ditched their longswords in favour of a couple of revolvers. There are also some more unusual options, such as dedicated diplomats that may be able to solve problems without resorting to their weapons.

While the first half of the book is focused on options for players, the rest is firmly aimed towards GMs. These range from guidelines for creating new NPCs to rules for chase scenes and mass battles. Again, nothing in there is going to be particularly surprising, but nonetheless it rounds out the ruleset and provides more options without becoming overwhelming.

If there's a criticism to the book it's that it doesn't really bring much to the table that you can't find in a dozen other games. There are a few neat ideas here and there – such as the arcane tattoos of the 'Marked' specialisation – but it can still feel a little flavourless, even for a generic system. Also, if you've been buying all of the *AGE* books released so far then you probably already own a decent chunk of the content of offer in the *Companion*.



Still, the book is densely packed with ways to expand your campaign and is well worth picking up if your group is already interested in *Fantasy AGE*.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

CAPHARNAUM – THE TALES OF THE DRAGON-MARKED

Designer: Raphaël Bardas, François Cedelle, Sarah Newton et al. | **Artist:** Various

383 | 17+ | £35



Capharnaum's blend of Arabian tales featuring deserts, djinn and swashbuckling adventure is a welcome twist on traditional fantasy RPG tropes but, while the worldbuilding is on point, a few clunky areas in the ruleset itself can drag down the energetic pace it's focused on building elsewhere.

The game has actually been around in French for many years, but the translators at Mindjammer Press have now managed to bring the Inner Sea setting to life in English. Everything from the art to the snippets of story drip with a distinct style of Arabian fantasy; even the GM is dubbed the Al-Rawi, apparently an Arabic term for 'storyteller.'

Capharnaum makes it clear from the very beginning that the party will be playing as larger-than-life heroes, as every single player character begins the game with a mystical mark somewhere on the body that denotes them as something special.

The way they go about performing their extraordinary deeds is handled by a neat little mechanic based around rolling a number of d6s. As with many other systems, the amount you get to throw depends on both innate attributes and trained skills, but the twist is that you can only keep an amount equal to your skill rating. This increases the importance of good training and specialisation, while still allowing characters to get lucky every now and then.

However, there are several petty niggles that keep getting in the way at the most inopportune moments. Every other roll or check seems to come with minor bookkeeping; none of it is particularly boring or complicated, but it just adds extra distractions that take you away from the madcap excitement for a few vital moments.

While it's not without a few problems, *Capharnaum* is certainly a breath of fresh, desert air amidst the confines of traditional western fantasy gaming.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

BLACK VOID

A whole lot of something

Designer: Christoffer Sevaldsen | **Publisher:** Modiphius

419 | 12+ | £40



Black Void is an interesting premise. Sometime around 2,000 - 1,000 BC, humanity had its collective mind shattered after seeing some elder gods. Not the Cthulhu ones, though they are visually similar. Tentacles being, of course, the scariest mouth parts a creature can have. After this collective mind shattering, the survivors ended up in an alien city. And that post-awakening setting, where humanity is forcibly made aware of what lies beyond the veil, is incredibly interesting. However, reading through the *Black Void* core rulebook you'd be forgiven for putting it down and taking a breather as there is a lot to take in. With people and places having names like Tgh'Jrg, Emir of Qtasaq it becomes a near Herculean task just to remember who is who and what is where. Couple that with a setting that looks, tastes, and sounds Lovecraftian filled with elder gods and alien races, where every character has their own unique mutations and it's a recipe for DM burnout.

Black Void buries information in a deluge of tables about weapons, armours, boats, houses, esoteric materials, common goods, and slaves. Every potential action is written out with specific rules and effects which, for a game so packed with fluff, strangles the potential. There are 28 combat manoeuvres, all with their own rules! Sure, you can buy the GM screen and have all this information laid out for you but players are going to need a reference booklet of their own to understand what they can and can't do.



And the only reason that this is frustrating is that *Black Void* has some interesting stuff lurking amidst the tables and crunch. The races, unpronounceable though they might be, are visually interesting. The concept of humanity shattering because of the dark truths of the universe is compelling and the city that the game revolves around is well fluffed out. There's even a section that explains in nice straight forward terms what state humanity was in when the elder gods arrived. Explaining the sort of technology and cultures that human characters were drawn from. And each section provides helpful details on characters, notable locales, and plot hooks. Maybe this is part of the problem when you bill yourself as "esoteric" as the deliberately difficult names and concepts are near impossible to attach to anything of substance.

From a GM's standpoint, *Black Void* does pose an awkward question. What are you supposed to be afraid of? In the various Cthulhu games, you have a normal setting so the horror juxtaposes that well. Finding a shady figure in an alleyway is threatening; finding a pile of flesh that whispers secrets is horrifying. In *Black Void* however, that could be your character's lifelong best friend, whispery Steven. It almost feels like it's designed to make you need the campaign books.

Black Void is definitely going to come down to personal taste. With a setting that feels similar to Rowan Rook and Deckard's *Spire* and a sanity system that is required by law for any game about elder gods, it's already a specific cup of tea. Like peppermint and orange. Someone out there is going to love it but we'll pass. Though it is nice to see the D12 get some love as the game's primary dice.

ANNA BLACKWELL

PLAY IT? MAYBE

If you're a fan of hefty tomes filled to the brim with fluff, yes. If you prefer your games to tell you what you need and get out the way, no.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED SPIRE...

Both games centre around a terrible city filled with a plethora of races and dark magics.



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

THE MAGIC OF MUSIC

A choice ditty can liven up a fantasy tavern or add even more tension to a hard-fought battle. We run through how to successfully soundtrack your next roleplaying session

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Pazio**

Different cultures across the gulf of time and space have traditions for honouring those who fall in battle, many of which are inextricably linked with music. Some sing mournful dirges as they torch a warrior's boat, for example, while others find solace in the wail of bagpipes as rain-slick coffins are lowered into the sodden earth.

For our Thursday night *D&D* group things are a little different, but no less solemn for it. Whenever one of their allies fails one too many death saves while confronting a dragon or gets straight-up vaporised by a disintegration ray, they're always seen off with the same, haunting melody.

Namely, *Brothers in Arms* by the Dire Straits.

Over four years only a handful of imagined funerals have been narrated to the sound of Mark Knopfler and his guitar, but every time the song manages to add an incredible feeling of loss and triumph to proceedings. Whether the party is staring out over a flame-licked lake or dumping a handful of ash out of their airlock, the background music grounds them and gives a rather wonderful excuse for gazing deeply and dramatically into the void.

The only problem with this little tradition arises when the song comes on while I'm driving; explaining to my family why a random rock song from the '80s is making me well up so much can be a little tricky.

IN THE BACKGROUND

There's a damn good reason why almost every movie and TV series makes use of near-constant background music when things are getting tense or exciting. If chosen well, a song can help to build the mood of the scene and conjure up all kinds of emotions in the watchers.

If you want proof, try sticking on a video game and pushing the background music sliders all the way to the left. Most of the time you'll be left with an experience that feels weird and slightly empty.

Now, most RPGs out there don't tend to come with background music as standard. All we have is our voices and the occasional whack of the tabletop for emphasis and – in all honesty – that's all we really need to set the scene.

Just because we don't strictly need something doesn't mean we don't want it. With a little bit of thought, and some half-decent Bluetooth speakers, a little bit of backing music can add a certain amount of pizzazz to a session and provide an easy way to help set the scene.

LOW KEY

There are a couple of tricks to sliding into a joint role as DM/DJ. The first and most obvious of these is setting things up so you can hear the music without things getting annoying.

Those handy little portable speakers are your friend here – though if you're playing somewhere with easy access to a better sound system you might as well take advantage of it.

Just remember that while background music can enhance a scene, you don't want it to dominate proceedings. Keep things quiet enough to easily talk over, and if someone's finding it hard to hear a fellow player or the GM over the music, it's time to turn it down a bit.

As far as music selection goes, the world is your oyster. Most genres of RPG have some kind of musical themes associated with them, whether that's the orchestral horns and violins of grand fantasy battles or the wibbly synths of intergalactic sci-fi. In general, though, try to stick to music without lyrics – at least lyrics in a language you and your players can understand – as it's easy for that to become distracting.

On a final note, if you're playing in a public venue like a convention or a coffee shop, maybe leave the speakers at home; while your players may love a couple hours of faux-fantasy ballads, the other patrons may not be quite so appreciative...



TRACKING DOWN TRACKS

There are an incredible amount of sources for music out there, from CDs to online streams, but here are a handful of the most reliable:

YOUTUBE

YouTube is an absolutely wonderful source for RPG music. A couple of minutes searching should allow you to find hour-long compilations of jaunty tavern songs, dramatic orchestral pieces for battles and all the 1920s jazz you could ever need to keep a *Call of Cthulhu* game sounding authentic.

The biggest downside is that you might find your climatic duel with the lich interrupted by an advert for a betting company, and the fact that if you're using a phone or tablet as a source you always need to keep the app open. Both of these problems can be avoided by paying for the premium version of YouTube, but who on Earth does that?

SPOTIFY/AMAZON PRIME MUSIC/APPLE MUSIC/WHATEVER STREAMING SERVICE YOU USE

Look at all these services we have for piping red-hot music right into our gaming tables! All of them can be great sources for background music, but there tends to be fewer hour-long mixes that you can just set going and leave unattended for an entire battle.

There are some solid playlists already up on Spotify, but it can be worth taking the time to set up a few custom lists of your own to match appropriate moods. Having an epic mountaintop clash suddenly supported by jaunty lute and the occasional 'fol-de-rol' doesn't do much for the mood.

My advice is to raid video game soundtracks for genre-appropriate tunes. MMORPGs like *World of Warcraft* are especially good sources for sweet fantasy music that can play away unobtrusively for hours at a time. Almost as though they were meant to lull players into a trance-like state of play...

SYRINSCAPE/SPECIALISED APPS

There are a handful of tools out there that are custom-built to provide a soundtrack for RPG sessions. Syrinscape is perhaps the most well-known and widely-used, but it's far from the only one out there.

Obviously, as specialised tools for the job, these are really rather wonderful at providing the right ambience for your session. They tend to seamlessly loop tracks so you don't have to worry about having to scramble for new songs if the scene lasts longer than expected, and most of them also come loaded with a soundboard of slamming doors, exploding engines and all manner of other noises to toss into the mix at the appropriate moment.

Alas, like many awesome tools, Syrinscape is a little on the expensive side. A subscription will set you back about as much as a Spotify account, but you're unlikely to get as much use out of it – unless you drive to work to the sounds of fantasy battles, of course.

THE WITCHER PEN & PAPER RPG

Silver for monsters, steel for men (who are also monsters)

Designer: Cody Pondsmith, Mike Pondsmith | **Artist:** Various

335 | 18+ | $25

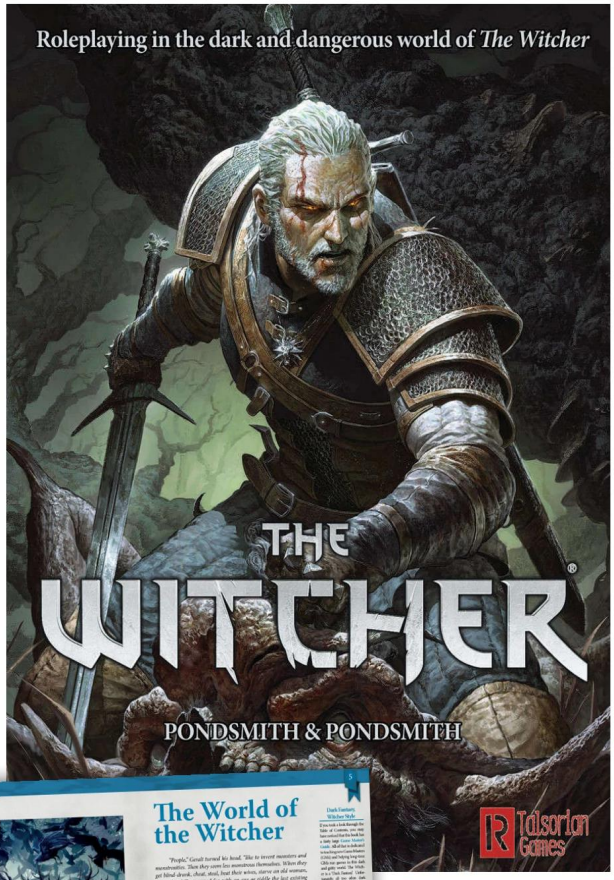
This video game adaptation does a great job of translating the deadly combat, elaborate monster hunts and gloomy setting of *The Witcher* to the tabletop, but unwieldy rules make it a hard sell for most gamers.

Based on the trilogy of PC and console games rather than the original books, *The Witcher Pen & Paper RPG* sends players into a dark fantasy world that rivals *Game of Thrones* for brutality. It's a world where the fearsome monsters of old are slowly dying off, only to be replaced by more mundane sources of evil that are somehow even worse.

This feel of struggling against the darkness is a core part of the experience and is something that truly sets *The Witcher RPG* apart from more conventional takes on heroic fantasy games. While you and your friends may build a neat little party of warriors and mages and set out with every intention of righting wrongs and smiting evil, you'll soon find that charity work doesn't pay doctor's bills or repair torn armour.

You're definitely going to need those services sooner or later, because the combat system is just as deadly as series fans would expect. Even the toughest characters can be badly injured with one particularly lucky blow, and if you allow a handful of drowners to get the jump on a mage or doctor you're probably going to need some new 'help wanted' posters before the end of the session.

This high-stakes combat isn't to everybody's tastes, but it does an incredible job of making every battle, even every cut and thrust, seem important. Your party may start out their campaign by charging wildly with swords blazing, but after gathering up their severed limbs a few times they'll realise the importance of a solid plan and abusing every possible advantage.





If you've played the video games, you'll know that in *The Witcher* these advantages often take the form of making sure you have the right potions, blade oils and weapons to hand, and this has carried over to the tabletop version. There are detailed systems for brewing up all manner of juices using herbs and assorted lumps of fallen monsters, as well as rules for crafting new gear and upgrading weapons.

These can be fun to play around with, but if you want to make the most of them – and if you want to survive your upcoming battles you really do – there's a lot of inventory management to handle. It can cut into the drama when your alchemist wants to put the monster hunt on pause for a moment because the subterranean lair is a good place to find some phosphorus.

This is the great strength, but also the biggest weakness, of *The Witcher RPG*. There are so many moving parts that it can be tough to manage and keep a flow going, but if you and your group are truly invested in the world it can be a great simulation. It can feel like a chore to track the durability of every weapon and piece of armour on your body, for example, but the realisation that you can't head off on your next adventure without hiring a smith to repair your breastplate is exactly the kind of thing that makes it feel like *The Witcher*.

Even the core mechanic and skill system feel incredibly appropriate for the world. It's simple on the surface, but as you play the game you realise that it heavily emphasises training and experience over blind luck.

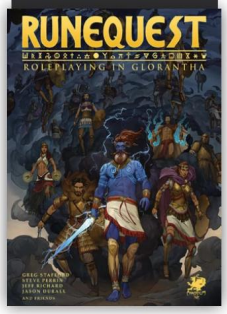
Every check is made by rolling a d10, but depending on your stats and skills you might be adding anything from a +3 to a +20 to the result, even early in the game. This means that unless critical successes or failures come into play, a specialist is virtually guaranteed to do much better at their given task that someone who hasn't trained – something that fits neatly into *The Witcher RPG*'s focus on careful planning and preparation.

Ultimately, there's a lot of great ideas on display in *The Witcher RPG*, but this isn't something that can act as a gentle stepping-stone from video games to the tabletop. In the great Venn diagram of tastes, it's aimed squarely at that section where fans of simulationist RPGs and *The Witcher* video games overlaps – if that describes you this is well worth a play.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... RUNEQUEST: ROLEPLAYING IN GLORANTHA

If you love deadly combat, broad mechanics, and a ruleset that's deeply tied into the setting, *The Witcher* might be right up your alley.



WE SAY

A blood-soaked and brutal game, combining fairly complex rules with a heavy focus on storytelling.

RUNEQUEST: ROLEPLAYING IN GLORANTHA

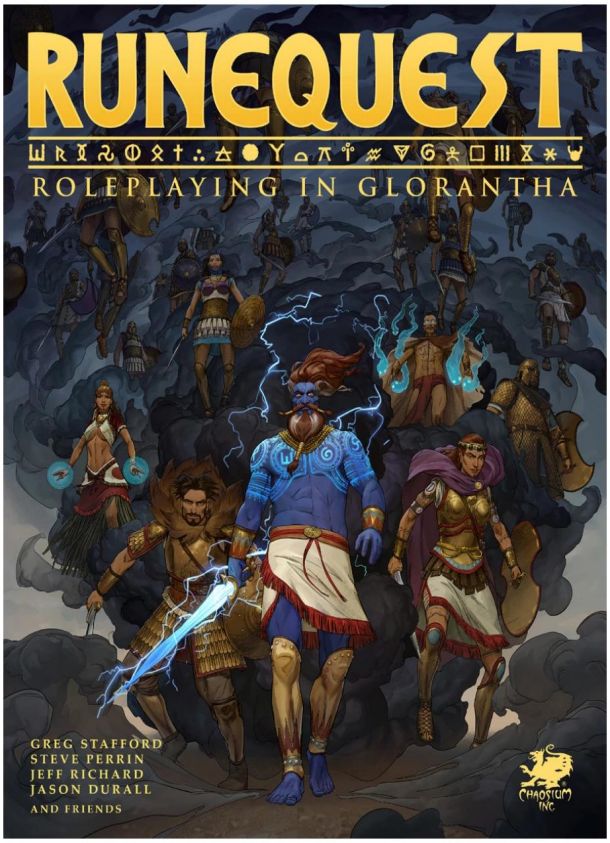
Adventure in a Bronze-Age world of magic and mysticism







Designer: Greg Stafford, Steve Perrin, Jeff Richard, Jason Durall et al. | **Artist:** Various



In a market stuffed to the gills with fantasy RPGs, *RuneQuest* offers something a little different from the heroic norm – something a little deadlier, rooted in a time of bronze and barbarians, where historic realism mixes with raw, primitive magic that hangs in the air like early morning mist.

This creates a weird and wonderful mix of simulation and wild fantasy that captures the feeling of ancient myths and legends. Virtually every hero draws at least some power from arcane runes, but none of them are so mighty that they can shrug off a determined hack with a broadsword. One moment a shaman will be communing with a spirit; the next, the heroes will be forming themselves into a phalanx.

As the subtitle suggests, the setting is an utterly vital part of the game. The world of Glorantha has served as the background to *RuneQuest* since the first edition made its way onto shelves in 1978, but the latest iteration is so closely woven in with the game system itself that separating the two seems like a near-impossible task.

This brings a whole stack of benefits, as you can virtually guarantee that every character at the table will have some kind of solid tie to the game world once you run through the creation process, but it also makes a truly homebrewed world tricky to run without substantial effort from the GM. For better or for worse, if you want to get the full experience you're probably going to be playing in Glorantha.

The tight relationship between the game and the world becomes clear when you create a character. This is a lengthy process that not only builds up the character's stats and abilities, but also links them to major events in recent history, provides them with passions and hatreds that can influence future dice rolls, and ties them into a cult that demands tithes and sacrifices in return for power and aid.

Simply making a character with someone will probably be enough to decide whether or not *RuneQuest* is the game for them. On top of the commitment to setting and creating a hero at least somewhat grounded in reality – you're unlikely to be running into any lone-wolf half-vampires with a mysterious past – it prepares them for dealing with the ruleset.

In both cases, while there's nothing particularly complex to work out, there is an awful lot to keep track of and understand. The core mechanic is incredibly simple, with percentage-based skills that will be instantly familiar to anyone who has played *Call of Cthulhu* or any one of the other Basic Roleplaying games drawn from Chaosium's catalogue, but simplicity doesn't always mean straightforward.

In character creations this translates to a specific choice of clan providing a 35% bonus to the llama-riding skill, while in combat it means tracking how badly your spear was damaged by a parry or determining if the wind is strong enough to reduce the accuracy of the arrow you just fired. No individual part of the game is particularly difficult to grasp, but the sheer breadth of systems that span from maimed limbs to the results of the annual harvest can be overwhelming.

Sometimes it feels as through *RuneQuest* relies on not only having a GM that that is incredibly familiar with the book, but also one that is confident enough to know when to ignore it and simply handwave minor rules issues.

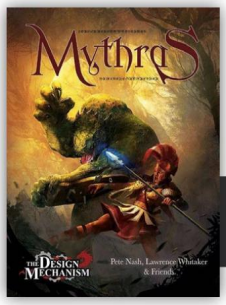
The character creation process, for example, relies on rolled stats and, while the book suggests a few situations where it's acceptable to re-roll bad results, it's unclear whether these are actually rules or simply guidelines, leaving the decision squarely in the GM's lap. There's nothing wrong with giving confident GMs the power to make decisions in the interest of having fun, but relying on it can be dangerous.

Ultimately, *RuneQuest* succeeds in carving out a powerful niche in the crowded world of fantasy roleplaying, building something that is truly unique. The world of Glorantha won't be for everybody, but those who give it a chance may find its blend of earthy realism and heady mysticism utterly intoxicating.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

A game steeped in both real-world and fictional history, where wild myths meld with a realistic approach to rules.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... MYTHRAS

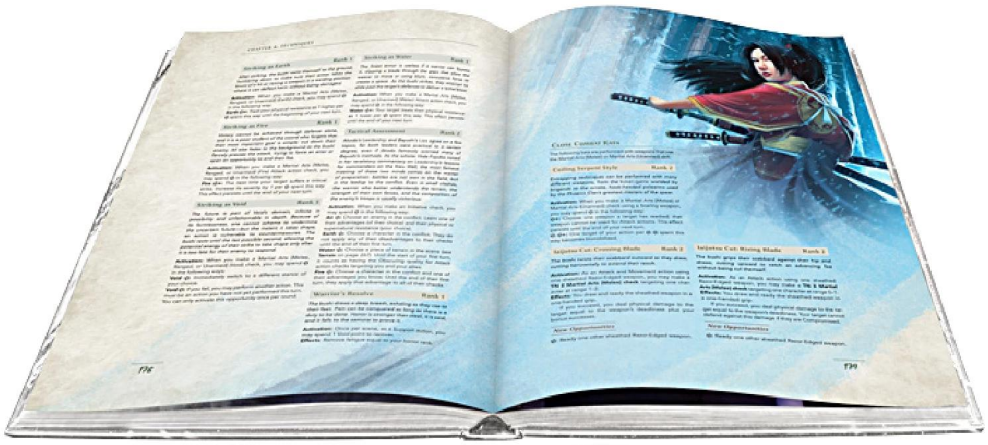
The relationship between *Mythras* and *RuneQuest* is a long and complicated one, but if you've enjoyed one you're likely to get a kick out of the other.

LEGEND OF THE FIVE RINGS RPG

Live by the code, die by the sword

Designer: Fantasy Flight team | **Artist:** Various

336 | 11+ | £39



This latest incarnation of *Legend of the Five Rings* is a shining example of how an RPG can commit so deeply to a setting and playstyle that it's impossible to imagine one existing without the other. It's a game utterly dedicated to tales of samurai, shinobi and the Japanese-inspired mythology of Rokugan.

This is both its greatest strength and most obvious weakness. While it makes for an incredible path into the game world and riffing on traditional tropes of honour and duty, it quickly breaks down if you try and prise it from its comfort zone.

If nothing else, that means every member of the party takes up the role of a samurai. Fortunately, that doesn't mean that you're going to be running around as a half-dozen identical sword-wielding stoics in fancy armour, as the game is quick to remind us that samurai is a social class rather a job description. Depending on how you feel, and how the lengthy character creation process works out, you might emerge as a bare-fisted monk, a magic-wielding priest or even a skulking shinobi spy.

Once the party is assembled and outfitted from a dazzling array of equipment it's time to battle monsters, scheme your way though political intrigues and fight ritualised duels. It says a lot about *L5R* that each of these is given roughly equal prominence when it comes to rules and focus.

On the subject of rules, the core mechanics will feel instantly familiar to anyone who has played one of Fantasy Flight's recent *Star Wars* RPGs or the *Genesys* system. Like those, *L5R* is powered by sets of custom dice decorated with symbols representing successes, failures and various twists of fate and, while it can be irritating to shell out for enough sets – or proprietary dice roller apps – to accommodate everyone at the table, they keep the game zipping along nicely once you get going.





Whenever you try to achieve something tricky, whether that involves bisecting an oni or sneaking to a lover's bedchamber, you roll and keep a handful of dice based on skills, attributes and a half-dozen minor sources. One of the unique aspects of *L5R* is that each character has five elemental affinities – the titular five rings – that correspond to different attitudes. How they approach a task impacts how many dice they add to their pool.

If you were trying to sneak down that dark hallway by cautiously taking your time and avoiding risks, you might get to throw a number of dice equal to your earth affinity, while making a break for it when nobody is watching would be linked to fire. This is a nifty little twist that makes players think about not just what they're trying to do, but also how they approach it. The best thing is, even if people try and game the system by always acting according to their most powerful element, they're essentially just roleplaying their character.

The characters themselves are probably the most rules-intensive part of the system, thanks to the countless ways they can be modified and tweaked. A samurai can have advantages, disadvantages, passions, skills, anxieties and more besides that, all of which confer bonuses and penalties. On top of this there are more than 50 pages of potential techniques for players to sift through, ranging from deadly sword strikes to a spell that summons earthquakes.

Combined with the fairly streamlined core mechanics this creates a system that can be incredibly broad but rarely feels bogged down in complexity. You're unlikely to find yourself flicking through the rulebook in search for a piece of vital information, so long as the players themselves stay on top of their many abilities and attributes.

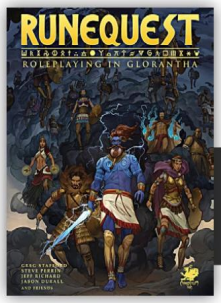
While the gameplay tends to be smooth, however, *L5R* can still be intimidating and possibly a little off-putting to some. The whole conceit of playing as samurai ties the characters into certain actions and attitudes that can feel stifling, especially if your group is moving over from a more traditional fantasy RPG.

If your interest in playing around with samurai starts and ends with dicing up goblins with a katana, you may be better suited to something like *Genesys*. But if you feel like leaning into a world where honour is more valuable than loot and identifying tea leaves is a character skill, you may well fall in love with *Legend of the Five Rings*.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

WE SAY

The custom dice can be an unwelcome expense, but if you want to embark on classic samurai adventures there are few options as detailed or immersive.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED...
RUNEQUEST: ROLEPLAYING IN GLORANTHA

Though they take very different paths, both games are great examples of putting a twist on traditional fantasy gaming by committing hard to the setting.

OVERLIGHT

Painting adventures with new colours

Designer: Paul Alexander Butler, George Holland | **Artist:** Kwanchai Moriya

300 | 11+ | £42

The most impressive thing about *Overlight* might just be the way in which it manages to build a traditional fantasy game without resorting to cliched wackiness. It lays out a world pulsating with both figurative and literal colour, and though it makes some odd design choices it still represents a haven for those looking to adventure somewhere original.

Overlight's creators describe it as a "kaleidoscopic" fantasy game, and one look at the rulebook should be enough to tell you the importance it places on colour and light. The traditional seven shades of light are linked to characters' stats, to the magic system and to the world itself, which is formed of seven vast, floating continents suspended above an endless ocean.

This feeds into an air of mysticism and quasi-spirituality that runs through the entire game – whether that sounds intriguing or silly to your ears will probably determine how you feel about *Overlight* as a whole. It isn't afraid to lean on tropes and clichés but makes a conscious effort to stray from the fire-breathing dragons, noble knights and crafty wizards of traditional Euro-centric fantasy. Instead, it looks to mountain-dwelling monks seeking enlightenment, masked warriors armed with obsidian-tipped spears and magic-wielding, crimson-faced apes – anything you'd expect to find on the sleeve of a '70s prog-rock album, really.





This weird and wonderful imagery all folds into a game that, once you get it to the table, actually plays in a fairly traditional manner. The stage is set for all kinds of colourful adventures, but still fits into the mould of skill checks, combat and resource management that most RPG fans should be instantly familiar with.

Other than the setting, the most important factor that sets *Overlight* apart from, say, *Dungeons & Dragons* is probably the extensive magic system that gives each and every character the chance to channel their energies into fantastical abilities. These are incredibly varied, ranging from the power to instantly diagnose any ailment through to bleeding liquid magma onto any enemy foolish enough to wound you.

The section on these Chroma abilities is by far and away the longest in the book, making up almost a third of the page count. This is both a blessing and a curse as, while it does present a huge amount of variety, it's a hell of a lot for both players and GMs to familiarise themselves with. Every entry is carefully written out and described in a lovely way, but picking out the mechanical details at a glance is a tricky proposition.

In fact, this is an issue that runs throughout *Overlight* – the entire game is stuffed with inventive, interesting ideas that don't seem to gel to well when it comes to the practical side of playing the game. For example, if one character decides to play a Zenith Monk, the rules specify that another player must take up the role of their ape-like Hamanu companion. On paper this is a cool twist, but at the table it can be obtuse.

Similarly, while the game is built around several physical and mental attributes like so many other RPGs, it ditches the usual array of traits to focus on the more spiritual side of things. Again, this is a neat idea, but it means that it's near-impossible to work out what combination of dice players need to roll for fairly standard interactions like sneaking past an enemy or picking a pocket.

Finally, it has a thoroughly useless index. Rather than picking out the most pertinent sections for each term it seems to list every single appearance, so the entry for the 'Will' trait, for example, directs to well over 100 separate pages. That sounds very minor, and it probably is, but it's another stumbling step that feels as though it should have been smoothed out during the design process.

Overlight is a game crafted with more passion than polish. And though that passion shines as bright and colourful as you could ever want, it does mean having to deal with a few irritations.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

Great ideas and beautiful art, let down by some weird design decisions.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... NUMENERA

If you liked *Numenera*'s weird fantasy you might feel at home with *Overlight*'s floating continents and spear-wielding bird-folk.



PLAYING BALL

Snorri Cheerisdottir was an oddity, even among her own adventuring party. Where her friends were quiet, cautious and tight-lipped, she was loud and confident to a fault.

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Wizards of the Coast** illustration by **Zoltan Boros**

Sometimes they balked at her willingness to trust shady characters offering mysterious deals, or to blindly pick a passageway after they'd spent half a day deliberating at the fork, but over time they came to trust her instincts. If nothing else, they learned to make the most of the distractions caused when a grinning gnome burst into a cult ceremony and started enthusiastically shaking hands.

Outside of battle, Snorri also led the way in getting the scattered band of misanthropes to talk to one another and open up about their litany of tragic backstories. She had a way of asking shamelessly personal questions about her friends' half-hidden scars, cursed magical items and weird powers that encouraged them to open up and reveal details to the group at large

Honestly, Snorri was never the most effective warrior in the world, but she contributed in another way. Rather than lead the heroics herself, she simply pushed and prodded her allies into seizing the opportunities the world presented.

If that's not the sign of a good hero, I don't know what is.

HELP WANTED

When everything is going well, being a GM might just be one of the greatest and most satisfying experiences in gaming. Sitting there as story threads knit together before you, watching the joy and horror pass across your players' faces is a truly incredible feeling that can make you forget how much your throat hurts and how badly you need to use the bathroom.

However, GMing can also be tough. Even if you aren't forced into arranging the time and place for your game, buying all the books and printing off the character sheets, simply running the show can be a taxing experience. There are plenty of ways that you can help to minimise this stress yourself, but that's not what this particular column is about.

No, this time around we're going to talk about what we can do when we're on the other side of the screen – when we're sat down as players.

I realise this isn't exactly a brand new topic, but if you take a look online you'll soon find that most of tips floating around out there are pretty basic: remember your character sheet, take notes, don't miss a session without telling the GM, that kind of thing. Rather than look at table etiquette or spitting out a list of things you shouldn't do, I'd rather take the time to take a look in a more positive direction. I want to talk about the many ways that we can help our GM and improve the game as players.

PUSHING THE PLOT

There are a fair few things we need to keep in mind when we roll up a new character, but one of the best ways to start smoothing out our GM's life is to make sure that we're playing someone that will actually do things.

Okay, that's a little reductive – a character who doesn't do things is closer to a plank of wood than a hero – but what I mean by "do things" is to take the lead, make decisions and generally get the plot rolling under their own steam. This doesn't mean they have to be a leader or even particularly confident, but it does mean they should have a goal in mind and be constantly working towards it.

Handling the pace of a game can be one of the hardest aspects of running an RPG session, and having someone willing to keep things trucking along at a decent pace can take a lot of the pressure off.

Sometimes this means asking the GM about a way to work your long-lost sister into the story, and sometimes it means opening the mysterious chest rather than tossing it in a sack and forgetting about it. In any case, managing a story becomes a heck of a lot easier when you can rely on the players – and the characters – to actively move forward with the stories and forge their way through the world.

BITING THE HOOK

There's a weird stigma in the RPG world about following obvious story hooks. Decades of discussion over the evils of railroading players down linear paths has given people the impression that taking the bait and allowing

"one of the best ways to start smoothing out our GM's life is to make sure that we're playing someone that will actually do things"



yourself to follow the GM's adventure is a sign of weakness.

This is real, real stupid.

There are some games and some campaigns that are completely designed around the ideas of open worlds and freeform storytelling, but if you're playing a campaign built with some semblance of a plot in mind, do your GM a favour and give it a try. Make no mistake, there's still plenty of room for off-the-wall plans and improv within the boundaries of a pre-written adventure.

Of course, this isn't to say that we can't get a little grumpy when the world utterly overrides our agency in favour of telling its own story, but so long as our decisions still matter we're going to have a lot more fun by embracing the plot than by ignoring it outright.

In short, if a nearby building explodes, go to investigate it. Don't just call the fire brigade and then wonder why nothing interesting is happening.

BUILDING THE WORLD

One of the great joys of playing RPGs is the fact that it's a collaborative experience. You aren't just building a story on your own, but creating it alongside a band of friends and colleagues. With this in mind, making an effort to contribute to the world can take a little bit of the pressure off the GM – usually assigned the lofty role of reality manager – and hook you deeper into the stories you're crafting.

As a disclaimer, this one is actually a matter of personal taste and preference for most people. There are some GMs out there who have a crystal-clear vision of their game world and don't particularly want the players to meddle in it.

As far as I'm concerned, however, few things make me happier than having players invent new customs, new characters and new secrets for the world we're building together. If nothing else, it helps to cut down on the amount of details I need to memorise if I can pass responsibility onto a player.

NOT THE ONLY PLAYERS

Sometimes I think that the way we describe the different roles at the table – that of players and GMs – isn't particularly useful. It causes some of us to forget the fact that the GM is actually a player too.

With this in mind, we can help out GMs to actually have a good time by actually treating them as though they were another player. We wouldn't interrupt someone else at the table while they're doing a dramatic speech (hopefully, anyway), so why do we feel compelled to start slinging spells at the villain while they're still declaiming their evil plans?

This is perhaps the most important point in this entire piece. If you want to help out your GM, remember that they're playing a game too. They might have slightly different rules and goals on their side of the screen, but they're still there to have fun.



WARHAMMER 40,000 ROLEPLAY: WRATH & GLORY

For the glory of the Emperor?

Designer: Ross Watson | **Artist:** Various

452 | 11+ | £48



Of all the RPGs based in the grim darkness of the *Warhammer 40,000* universe, *Wrath & Glory* probably comes the closest to pinning down its chaotic, customisable and often contradictory tone. However, this comes packaged alongside a rulebook stuffed with confusing design decisions and a worrying amount of outright errors.

The *40,000* universe is a mish-mash of a thousand different sci-fi and fantasy tropes that flips between outrageous power fantasies and unrelenting horror. It's a setting that blends the aesthetics of Soviet tenements with death metal album covers, where regular humans fight alongside gene-spliced demigods, the nominal good guys are xenophobic fascists and mystic powers have a decent chance of melting your brain.

As you might expect, this can throw up a few challenges when it comes to creating an RPG – if you tried to slot in a traditional *D&D* party the elf would be instantly murdered while the paladin could conquer a small city single-handed. Earlier *40,000* games have aimed to capture the blood-soaked world of Games Workshop's flagship wargame a piece at a time, but *Wrath & Glory* instead goes for an all-encompassing route.

It avoids the issue of pairing up nigh-on invulnerable Space Marines with the famously fragile human grunts of the Imperial Guard by breaking out the game into five separate tiers of play that will last an entire campaign. At first tier the party could be made up of a few soldiers or thieves dealing with problems that impact a town or city, while fourth and fifth tier campaigns see famous heroes in millennia-old powered armour set out to save entire star systems.

While it's possible to run long-form epic campaigns in *Wrath & Glory*, the system seems best-suited for comparatively short adventures. This not only allows you to jump between tiers of play, but also gives scope for playing around with factions that don't see eye-to-eye, which range from Aeldari Corsairs – think space-elves with their traditional arrogance dialled up to 11 – to gloriously silly Ork Kommandos.

Once you hit the table the game is chunky without being too fiddly, with a major focus on combat. This is another area that *40,000* RPGs have often struggled with, as the fiction of the universe often has huge gaps in the strength between different species and factions. When it comes to overpowered heroes taking on legions of disposable minions, *Wrath & Glory* allows the GM to bunch of several enemy troops into mobs that effectively act as one buffed-up foe, giving players the chance to be suitably awesome while still presenting them with a threat. On the other side of the coin, when weaker players confront tough opponents, they'll almost always be faced with defences that are near-impossible to overcome.

The fact that *Wrath & Glory* does such a good job of bringing these tricky elements together makes it all the more disappointing that the rulebook itself is so difficult to recommend.

If you read a page of rules and have to spend a few minutes squinting at the words before it makes sense, it's probably badly written. In *Wrath & Glory* this seems to be the rule rather than the exception. Good ideas are weighed down by confusing explanations and weak layout that hides important details within walls of text.

All this is made infinitely worse by the sheer quantity of mistakes. Large rulebooks from small studios almost always have a few problems here and there; however, the sheer volume of errors and typos in *Wrath & Glory* could strain the patience of even the most charitable observer. Is there a difference between 'shock damage' and 'shock'? Does a Wild Card keyword just mean you can just pick one you want? None of the most obvious issues are too tough to adjudicate for a confident GM, but it's another layer of complication in an already perplexing rulebook.

There's a good game somewhere in *Wrath & Glory* – probably the best *40,000* RPG released so far – but if you want to find it you'll need to sort through a fair amount of confusing mess first.

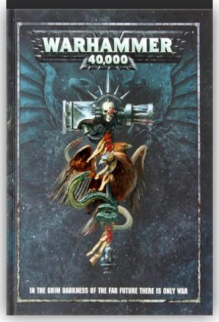
RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

Come for the great ideas, stay because you're not sleeping until you've found all the typos.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... WARHAMMER 40,000: EIGHTH EDITION

If you're a fan of *40,000*, you've probably spent countless hours dreaming up adventures in the grim, dark future. *Wrath & Glory* is the best way to live them out.







NIBIRU

Remember, Remember…

Designer: Federico E. Sohns

201 | 13+ | £40

Can an entire game be carried by just one idea? Well, if that idea is as compelling, creative and exciting as *Nibiru*'s memory-building the answer might well be a "yes".

On a very broad level the game's a sci-fi adventure that's a little bogged down with beautiful but star-dense lore, but that description misses out the coolest part of the entire game. Where most RPGs ask you to start off adventures with a solid idea of your character already pinned down to the sheet, *Nibiru* instead sends you out into the world with something close to a blank slate.

You start as a vagabond somewhere in the steel hallways of a vast, planet-sized space station. You have with no stats, no gear and, most importantly, no memories.

As the game plays out you get the chance to add to these memories and use them to completely shape and re-shape your character on the fly. If you're pinned down in a firefight you might invoke a hazy recollection an afternoon nailing cans with a BB gun, for example, allowing you to instantly pop one foe in the head and gain a permanent bonus to shooting.

Similarly, you might be climbing a dangling rope and suddenly think about how cool it would be if your rough-and-tumble brawler, long-plagued by the memories of dead AI servants, had a horrible memory of falling into the void somewhere in a past life. You'd fail the roll and incur an ongoing penalty to climbing checks, but taking on the negative memory gives you more points to spend on happy ones elsewhere.



The possibilities that the system offers are damn-near endless, though they do require a fair bit of friendly give-and-take between players and GMs if everything's going to work smoothly. None of the categories you can invoke memories for – what would be called skills in most games – are nailed down and the advice in the rulebook is a little hazy. It would be easy for players to try and break the game with over-broad categories – "talking" or "fighting", say – but it's also annoying to sink valuable memory points into playing the harp and then never have them come up.

Despite this, the MEMO system – as it's labelled in the rulebook – is a truly fascinating little idea and the shining, sparkling heart of the game. Honestly, it can be easy to spend so much time thinking about the possibilities of playing around with memories that you almost forget about the rest of the game.



That would be a shame, however, because *Nibiru* is a fascinating, imaginative and thoroughly weird place to play. The lore behind the vast space-station takes up almost half of the core rulebook's 200-ish pages, going into incredible detail about the social inequalities that plague its society and weird creatures that lurk in its depths.

Wonderfully, there's even a chapter contributed by a genuine astrophysicist brought in as a consultant. This deals with explanations of some of the game's more science-ey elements, such as the surprisingly involved system for tracking artificial gravity levels as the party travels, and is a fascinating read.

The downside to the beautiful, complex nature of the world is that the endless chapters devoted to explaining it are dense as all hell and stuffed to the gills with a complicated new lexicon to memorise. Unless you have a better memory than most, you're going to be constantly bouncing back to the glossary to remind yourself who the En□su and Silu are, and why the Umbra is so different from the Antumbra.

You can probably ignore many of the details as you play, as the game's set-up virtually demands that the heroes are a little shady on the world's details and even the GM only really needs the specifics of the area they're currently adventuring in. However, the sheer volume of densely-written material to absorb can be pretty damn intimidating, especially if your players are the kind who like to get invested in the world they're exploring.

Honestly, *Nibiru* sometimes feels like a game that could have benefitted from a bit of a trim and some polishing. Most of the ideas are top-notch and the MEMO system is an absolute gem, but the book as a whole is a little rough around the edges.

If you're a fan of the truly fascinating, however, this shouldn't stop you from checking the game out and making some memories of your own.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? PROBABLY

Incredibly intriguing ideas tied to some beautiful – if dense – lore makes for one of the most interesting games of recent years.

TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED… THINGS FROM THE FLOOD

If you enjoy moody sci-fi and the storytelling side of RPGs, *Nibiru* is going to be right up your alley

THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

THE RECAP



Keeping your games on track can be tricky when adventurers ascend from the dungeon wielding mighty new weapons, clutching important artefacts, and groaning under the weight of shiny loot – only to ask, "why did we do that again?" The answer? The recap

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Modiphius**

RPG campaigns tend to accumulate traditions and rituals as the years slip by. Maybe you order pizza when you level up, maybe you stick a certain song on the speakers whenever a character gets disintegrated.

In most of the groups I play with, we've developed a particular way to mark the switch from the 'hanging round and chatting' part of the evening to the 'stabbing up some goblins' phase. It's one of the most important parts of the session, even though it doesn't have any actual impact on the game.

It comes when the figure behind the screen clears their throat, cutting through the babble of gossip and grumbling, and asks the room a question.

"So, what happened last time?"

LOOKING BACK

Sometimes the stories we tell at the tabletop can get a little bit complicated. When we rush through back-to-back battles with gene-spliced mutants and negotiations with alien ambassadors, it shouldn't come as much of a surprise that the details can get buried in the long, grey morass of time between game sessions.

For this reason, a decent pre-game recap is vital to setting up a solid foundation for your session. Without it, hours of gameplay can be lost to indecision and confusion, as the players fail to recall exactly what magical artefact they're hunting for, or why one of them appears to be carrying a severed arm in their backpack.

The form this takes will vary from group to group, but ideally you should always leave the players sure of three things:

What just happened
Why it happened
Where they're going

DETAILS, DETAILS

As silly as it sounds, there's a little bit more to a recap than just running through the facts of the last game you had together. While this will probably make up the bulk of the summary, it's also important to provide a bit of context here and there.

Sure, we get that the party was exploring the Tomb of the Dragon Lords, but knowing why they're there in the first place is also pretty darn important. Likewise, if the city they're in is plagued by riots it's probably worth establishing that they know it was caused by the shuffling of a Great Old One asleep in the bay. Sometimes it can be worth just quickly establishing the main points of the entire campaign, especially if you want to keep things focussed.

Hopefully most of the players will know all this already, but it never hurts to take a moment or two to ensure that everybody is on the same page. This is especially true if there's been a sizable gap between sessions or if some of them have memory or attention issues.

The same can be said of clarifying what the group's current plans are. While this will usually be obvious, spending a handful of seconds on an out-of-character discussion over their goals for the session can pay massive dividends further down the line.

REMEMBER FOR ME

There are two main ways to get a recap going. In the first, the GM picks up their notes and runs through the details, filling in questions and making sure the players know everything they need to know along the way – you went here, killed these monsters, spoke to this NPC.

This is a perfectly reasonable way to run things and is almost certainly the most efficient way to get the recap done and the game started. When you hold the reins, you can ensure that all the important points are neatly covered.

However, I personally prefer the second method, which shifts the bulk of the work onto the players themselves. This all starts with that question mentioned earlier: "So, what happened last time?"

This is bit trickier to handle, as many players don't exactly excel at the art of note taking. However, with some careful guiding questions and the occasional clarification it can work wonders.

Simply asking the players why they travelled somewhere or what happened next can get them excitedly running through events they'd long thought forgotten. If nothing else, it does a great job of slowly getting people into character and ensuring they're raring to go once the action starts up again.

On top of this, if you approach it in the right way, a recap can actually be a wonderful way to take a quick poll of your players' priorities.

Pay attention to what parts of the game – whether that be an epic combat, a moment of downtime or even a particular NPC – keep cropping up in their memories of your last meeting. If certain things keep sticking in their minds, that's probably a good indication of what they're having fun with.

HOW MUCH TO SHARE?

Whether you're choosing to let the players provide their own recaps or laying it down yourself, you may have to make some decisions about how much help you want to provide them.

For example, do you remind them that they picked up an easily-forgotten iron key ten minutes into the last adventure, knowing that it'll unlock the prison door they're just about to run into? Do you make sure to carefully list the names of the ambassadors they're negotiating with, or turn their forgetfulness into a plot point?

Whenever you're faced with a decision like this, it's worth remembering that the relation between in-game and real-world time is always going to be a little fuzzy. You can skip over a week's travel in a sentence, or stretch out a one-day dungeon crawl into a month of roleplaying sessions.

With this in mind, I usually try to err on the generous side when it comes to helping the players to remember the important little details that might have slipped their mind between games. Having a hero forget a fact they learned ten minutes ago because their player has had two weeks of reality fly by in the meantime isn't good for either immersion or enjoyment.

TO THE POINT

As much as I've waffled on about making sure to include this bit of information or that slice of context, this all needs to be balanced against the practical side of things. Simply put, you shouldn't be spending more than a couple of minutes on your recap.

Unless your group meets every six months and plays for 12 hours at a time, this shouldn't be a problem. However, if you do find things dragging, try to focus on jogging memories and summing up encounters rather than getting bogged down in details.

If the party fought their way through three different bands of goblins, you can probably smoosh them all into a single sentence – "On your way through the cave you fought some goblins." Similarly, if it's important that the party remember that their corporate contact is shady as hell you can get away with describing them as skeezy and letting their memories fill in the details around it.

> "Hours of gameplay can be lost to indecision and confusion, as the players fail to recall exactly what magical artefact they're hunting for"



JOHN CARTER OF MARS RPG

Interplanetary pulp perfection

Designer: Modiphius team | **Artist:** Various

278 | 13+ | £42



At first glance there doesn't seem to be anything too special about *John Carter of Mars* – there's no unique mechanic or complicated gimmick to help it stand out from the crowd. Once you dig a little deeper, however, you soon find that what the game lacks in bells and whistles it more than makes up for with a sheer, unwavering commitment to having fun.

The entire game emits waves of pulp-tinged excitement like a ball of madly grinning radium, and it's clear that the designers made a conscious decision to ditch any idea that didn't mesh with the theatrical heroics of the original *Barsoom* stories. Everything from combat to character creation encourages players to leap out of windows, ride chandeliers and pause a pitched battle to challenge the enemy commander to an honourable duel.

It's a refreshingly blunt take on the pulp adventure genre, but in all truth it's probably the only real way to match the tone of the setting. Dreamed up by Edgar Rice Burroughs – also known for creating *Tarzan* – the *Barsoom* books are packed with tales of derring-do and impossible heroism that would be a shameless power fantasy if it wasn't for the air of cheerful sincerity it exudes.

The world Burroughs created is saturated with violence and honour in equal measure; it's a world of radium-infused rifles and jewelled princesses, where multi-limbed monsters roam the wastes and airships drift over blue canals. Nothing about it seems particularly original to modern sensibilities, but the gleeful blend of so many different ideas produces something that can't easily be found in tabletop gaming.

In order to achieve the properly pulpy, heroic feel of *John Carter of Mars*, the team at Modiphius has streamlined and trimmed the 2d20 system, which has also cropped up in several titles including *Star Trek Adventures* and *Mutant Chronicles*. It's still chunkier than most deliberately lightweight games out there, but any kind of rule that could distract from the action has been tossed out of the window.

One of the more obvious examples of this comes from that fact that it doesn't bother with a traditional skill system. Rather than parcelling out a couple of things for each hero to be good at, the game chooses to operate under the base assumption that they're all effortlessly competent at anything they put their minds to, whether that's sneaking into an enemy camp or tracking a band of raiders through the burning Martian desert.

Some characters will still handle some tasks better than others thanks to their core stats, and every background lists a couple of areas where individuals may struggle, but beyond that they're given the room to be almost comically skilled.

This may sound a little silly, but the titular John Carter was a dashing hero who managed to instantly excel at everything from duelling to piloting airships, so why should our own heroes be limited by such paltry things as training and practice? Sure, it's not wildly realistic, but that isn't the point of the game.

Several other areas have been trimmed down, too. Every sword deals the same amount of damage and movement is abstracted into a handful of rough bands. There aren't any rules for cover; it's assumed that when characters are shot at, they'll naturally leap behind a convenient pillar while thinking up their next quip.

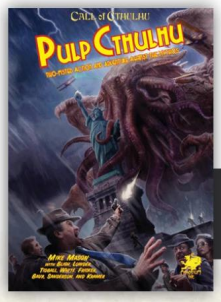
This does detract from the game's tactical combat, but that's not what *John Carter* really cares about either. Combat's main role isn't testing player skill or even luck, but giving the characters a chance to show off their bravery and strength.

Players who get their kicks from mechanically optimising their builds or struggling through dangerous, dirty worlds of darkness may quickly tire of the game's antics. If you're after a few nights of gaming guaranteed to stick a smile on your face, however, this is an unexpected gem just waiting to be uncovered.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

Everything from the rules to the artwork drips with liquid heroism. It may be a little dumb, but it's undeniably fun.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... PULP CTHULHU

There are a lot of similarities between *John Carter of Mars* and *Pulp Cthulhu*, but the former leans into the madcap adventures a little harder.





THE LOST CITADEL

Darkness and death in fifth edition

Designers: Various | **Publisher:** Green Ronin

299 | 18+ | £38

There have been many attempts to introduce a sheen of darkness to the heroically optimistic realms of *Dungeons & Dragons*, but *The Lost Citadel* manages to be a little grimmer than most. Its cocktail of rampant undeath, institutionalised slavery and endless violence can be rather tough to swallow, but if you're aching to explore only the gloomiest of tales it offers a fascinating place to start.

There are two major sections of the rather chunky book. The first of these deals with details of setting and of story, sketching out the realities of life in the vast city of Redoubt – a lone bastion of life and of tattered civilisation in a world consumed by tides of mindless undead monsters. It's all very gothic and gloomy in nature, with mysterious churches and warped magics filling the world with doubt.

The second side of the book is more concerned with the world's rules and mechanics, which draw from the popular *D&D 5E* ruleset by way of its Open Gaming License. It doesn't bother to lay out the basics of those rules, as it assumes the players already have access to them, but rather explains the myriad ways in which *The Lost Citadel* is and



– importantly – is not like a traditional *D&D* campaign.

These changes are sweeping and extensive, ranging from heavy restrictions on the classes and ancestries that players can pick through to a handful of entirely new mechanics revolving around the world's slow, lingering death. For example, alongside mere physical damage, the heroes can also suffer the impact of spiritual harm that rends their souls and spirits rather than their flesh.

Indeed, this forms a core part of many of the new character options presented to players delving into *The Lost Citadel*, which range all the way from new fighting styles through to entire classes built specifically for the setting. Several of the penitent's powers revolve around absorbing other characters' woes and corruption, for example while the re-worked warlock class instead allows players to dump these problems onto somebody else.

Every one of these is beautifully evocative and dripping with flavour, but in many places the designs don't feel quite as clean and simple as those presented in the core *D&D* books. Many come with so many restrictions and risks that it can be tempting to just fall back onto simple fighters and rogues built using the old, well-established rules.

Honestly, perhaps the biggest question hanging over the entire book is whether it truly needed to be built on the foundations of *D&D* in the first place. At times, it feels like *The Lost Citadel* would be rather more suited to a more lethal, less high-powered ruleset more fitting with the world's tone.

Before going any further, we should probably make it clear that this tone is pretty much guaranteed to be nasty, violent and potentially a little upsetting. The Dwarves of Redoubt, for example, have had their culture destroyed and bastardised by humanity, and are habitually enslaved for the imagined sins of their forefathers. Elves, meanwhile, are characterised as fragile beings with shattered, flawed minds that manifest as bouts of mental illness that often parallel those found in the real world.

The book has frequent sidebars on ways to approach these topics sensibly and respectfully at the table, but even then, these may well be things that some groups just don't want to deal with them on their game night.

Even beyond that, the premise of the game sets up a whole heap of more generalised nastiness. If you're put off by the idea of a book with not just one, but two separate stat blocks for when you need to fight some undead children, *The Lost Citadel* might not be for you.

If, however, you think that you and your table of adventurers would enjoy – or perhaps gain that rush of catharsis provided by the gorier kind of horror film – these kinds of situations, you'll find *The Lost Citadel* a competently assembled, imaginatively designed bit of work. Yes, some of the rules feel a little bit wonky in places, but at least that core of *D&D* should make it easy for many players to pick things up.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? MAYBE

Enjoying the endless horrors of *The Lost Citadel* requires a certain group and a degree of maturity, but if you like exploring the darkness it's a good place to start



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED FORBIDDEN LANDS...

When you want your fantasy dark and depressing, but want to stick to tried-and-tested rules

WE NEED REINFORCEMENTS

Pouring enemy spam on to players is no fun, but an organically occurring flow of enemies who heard the noise down the hall makes for dramatic showdowns and getaways. We discuss when to call in the reinforcements

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Modiphius & Christoffer Sevaldsen**



The party thought they had everything right in the palm of their stylishly gloved hands. There were only a handful of guards wandering the halls of the corporate-owned warehouse, and despite the eternal uncertainty of combat they were pretty confident of taking down the goons with minimal risk to themselves or – more importantly – their brand-new outfits.

Things certainly started off well. A couple of the rent-a-cops dropped to the initial burst of gunfire and katana-slashing, and before the bodies had even hit the floor most of the others were pinned behind crates stuffed with illegal tech. It looked like this was going to be just another brief snatch of combat in the exciting life of a cyberpunk.

And then they heard one of the mooks turning on their radio. They needed back-up, apparently. Lots of back-up.

The first wave of reinforcements stormed through the doorway just as the last of the initial guards fell. There were another half-dozen of them, all armed with battle rifles in place of the sidearms and clubs their bifurcated brethren had been wielding.

A challenge, to be sure, especially considering the minor dings and dents the team had suffered in those first few rounds of confusion. However, it was nothing they couldn't overcome with a bit of luck and a well-placed frag grenade or five.

As the sound of the explosions faded, though, it was replaced by that of roaring engines outside. Something big was pulling up.

By now it was clear that things were rapidly going south, but if they were willing to risk a couple of pot-shots from pinned enemies they could still grab the loot they'd come for – the schematics of a dangerous new type of cybernetic muscle enhancer – and make a clean-ish escape into the safe anonymity of the streets before anything else bad happened.

Then the walls exploded.

Through the clouds of brick dust strode a trio of power-armoured killing machines, their miniguns already spinning up with a whirr that set the party's teeth on edge. If they had all their gear, all their ammo and a plan, it might have been a fair fight. As it was, their goal had changed from securing an easy victory to scraping out some way to survive the night.

Things, they all agreed, had escalated rather quickly.

THE WELCOMING PARTY

I've got to admit, I'm an absolute sucker for confounding my players with reinforcements. Some of this probably comes from the fact that it's a nice and easy way to balance a battle on the fly, but honestly, I think I also like the way it makes the world feel a shade more believable.

Sure, we have to ditch a certain degree of realism when we start talking about tossing fireballs about the place. However, it doesn't seem too crazy to imagine that some of those goblins down the hallway might stick their head around the corner when they hear the explosions tearing through the dungeon.

Having a handful of reserves flood their way onto the battlefield as the fight progresses often feels entirely reasonable, and helps to make the entire world feel a little more dynamic – a bit more like something that lives and breathes, rather than a series of static, unconnected scraps in the dark.

On top of this, it can help to make battle feel truly epic in scale without being entirely unfair. The nature of many RPG combat systems means that being attacked by, say, 30 enemies all at once is much, much more dangerous than taking on three groups of ten that arrive on the battlefield a couple of rounds apart from each other.

Of course, it is possible to overdo it. The joys of exploring a dungeon would be rather hurt, after all, by having every single inhabitant rush the front door the moment the heroes arrived. There's also a chance that, if it isn't handled well, the flood of reinforcements can feel arbitrary and like an application of the dreaded GM Fiat.

> "It can help to make battle feel truly epic in scale without being entirely unfair"

ON THE WAY

One of the best ways to make the sudden arrival of more enemies to chop through feel reasonably fair and grounded is to give some kind of hint that they're coming. This can be as obvious as having the first wave of foes radio for back-up or smack out a warning on a drum, or as subtle as pointing out the sound of footsteps coming from the warren of small caves on one side of the room.

This approach also gives the players at least a slight chance to prepare for the incoming wave of ravening foes, and stops them from being caught entirely off balance. Hell, sometimes it will allow the party to turn the potential danger into a chance to look cool and feel clever, by setting up ambushes or prepping to drop area-of-effect attacks in the chokepoint where the bad guys should be arriving.

And if they do chop through the reinforcements with minimal hassle, there's no need to worry whatsoever. Those guys were essentially pulled from the void, and you can always send along another wave next round if you think things aren't epic enough.

REINFORCEMENTS V ESCALATION

Of course, at some point you're going to have to decide what kind of enemies are going to come in through the door. The natural inclination can be to flood the battlefield with more of the same, but you can also add an even more dramatic and dangerous edge to the battle by having the quality, size or general scariness of the enemies mount up over time.

This was the kind of escalating danger that the cyberpunks ran into when they raided the corporate warehouse, and it managed to turn an otherwise fun but forgettable throwdown into a proper fight for their lives. Sure, it didn't quite turn out the way they had planned, but it sure stuck in their stories for a long ol' time.

Having the truly powerful enemies only make an appearance after enough of their minions have been cut down is one of the best ways to make a battle feel truly desperate. It all-but guarantees that when the big bosses turn up the party are already running low on the resources, whether that means explosives or magic spells, that they'd usually pull out for dealing with such titanic foes.

This is one of the best ways to conjure up delicious "watching the entire room desperately scan their character sheets for some power of ability they've forgotten about" scenarios without having to rely on ludicrously overpowered enemies.

JUST DO IT

The best thing about all this, however, is the simple fact that most of the time you don't actually need to plan the reinforcements out in advance. If you feel a fight is going a little too easily or that things just don't have the excitement you're after, you can blow the doors of their hinges and toss in some more bad guys without a moment's hesitation.

Sure, it may not match up exactly with what's in your notes, but that doesn't really matter, does it? And if you're worried about daily XP budgets or things like that, you can easily yank the bad guys out of a later encounter. Hell, coming across an abandoned guard room and realising why it's empty can be a great way to make the players feel like they're in a properly organic world.

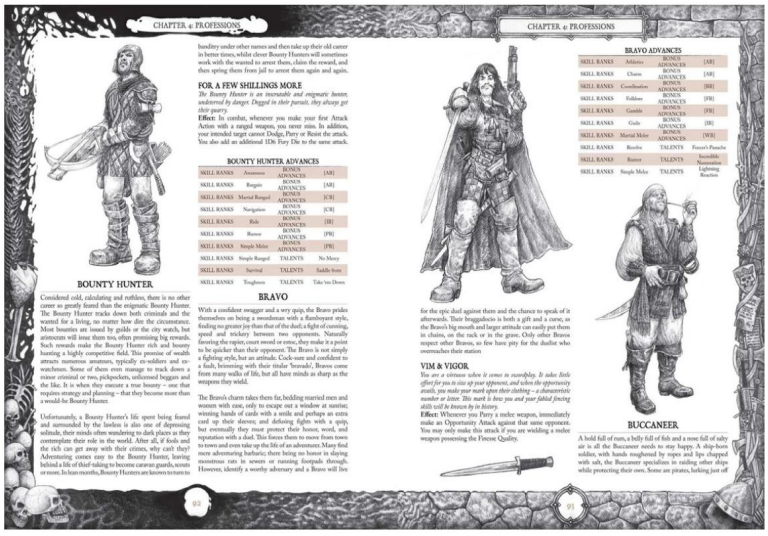
So, the next time you're looking for a way to spice up a battle, remember that you always have reinforcements sitting in your back pocket. Whether you planned it that way or not.

ZWEIHÄNDER: REVISED CORE RULEBOOK

Delightfully dark low fantasy

Designer: Daniel D. Fox | **Artist:** Dejan Mandic, Jussi Alarauhio, Ken Duquet

669 | 15+ | £45



The subtitle for *Zweihänder* is "*Grim & Perilous RPG*" and honestly there's no better way to describe it. It's dense as treacle, dangerous as a raging fire and grimmer than a taxi queue at 3am, with a thoroughly old-school feel that will delight veteran gamers without driving away curious newcomers.

The game has actually been out in one form or another for some time now, but its creators have just released this revised and retooled version of the core book. If any fans of the series are worried that the new art or designs would take away from the monochrome, gungy aesthetics of the book they can rest easily – *Zweihänder* is just as dark as ever, and with a page count reaching almost 700 it can still be used as a potent bludgeon if required.

The game's origins lie in a hacked-up version of *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay* and, despite some significant changes, the darkly humorous tone of the older title bleeds through every page. Though it's not set in any particular world, the tone draws from the same muddy late-medieval European vibe, where crossbows compete with flintlock pistols and rural farmers flock to squalid cities in search of a better life.

Yes, it's a world of fantasy but the more mystical aspects are kept obscure and dangerous. There are elves in the forests, but any wanderers are much more likely to receive an arrow through the neck than any aid. Magic flows on the winds but it's an untrustworthy and dangerous tool, and those who tap into its power risk death at the hands of a superstitious mob.

In fact, the risks inherent to growing power are a near-constant theme throughout *Zweihänder,* as greater strengths also bring more chances for characters to grow corrupt and decadent. The entire game deliberate distances itself from the traditional *Dungeons & Dragons* power fantasy, from its risky approach to spellcasting to the lethality of its combat system.

Even a high-powered character armed with the best weapons money can buy can fall to nameless brigands if they charge in without a plan or simply get unlucky. While it can be painful to see a hero you've spent months crafting lose an eye to a stray arrow, the sky-high stakes of every single combat encounter lend an incredible weight and importance to each attack roll and dodge.

One unfortunate side effect of all this is that combat can be a little slow at times, especially for newer players who are still coming to grips with the range of actions on offer. Even once everyone's up to speed fights can still drag on as attacks are met with parries and injuries cause rolls on one of the tables squirreled away in the GMing rules.

This is another distinctive aspect of *Zweihänder* – its overwhelming love for random tables. There are tables for hit locations, injuries and magical mishaps, but nowhere is this this love more apparent than during character creation. If you follow the rules as they're written, you'll randomly roll up everything from your character's starting profession to their eye colour – the impact that blind chance can have is immense.

Though you may head into the game dreaming of the silks and gunpowder of an elegant highwayman, there's a good chance that you'll end up in the smelly sandals of a club-toting peasant with all the charisma of a damp log. The rulebook is very explicitly opposed to re-rolling or simply picking results at will, instead asking players to enjoy discovering the character produced by their random rolls.

If players can embrace this – along with the fairly solid chance that their current character gets decapitated within the week – the unexpected combinations the dice throw up can lead to some truly special roleplaying moments. However, a sizable slice of the roleplaying population is going to struggle to enjoy playing a character that simply doesn't appeal to them at first glance.

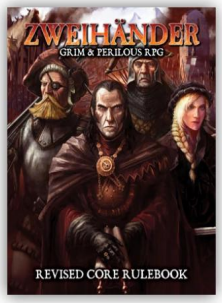
Others may also be turned off by the deliberately lo-fi and old-school nature of the book, with black-and-white pencil drawings the order of the day. Again, though, this is clearly a decision made by the designers and, though the illustrations sometimes come up a little short, the words are absolutely wonderful.

Zweihänder is an enormous tome. It's dense and it's dark, and so are the adventures it produces. Grasping the many rules and concepts bound within its pages isn't a simple task, but it is a very rewarding one.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

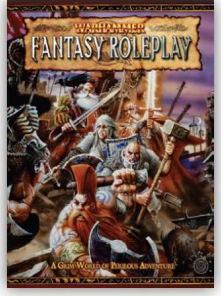
PLAY IT? YES

Many deliberately old-school, dark and dangerous games can make newcomers feel unwelcome. *Zweihänder* might be a little intimidating, but its infectious enthusiasm draws you in to every page.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... WARHAMMER FANTASY ROLEPLAY: SECOND EDITION

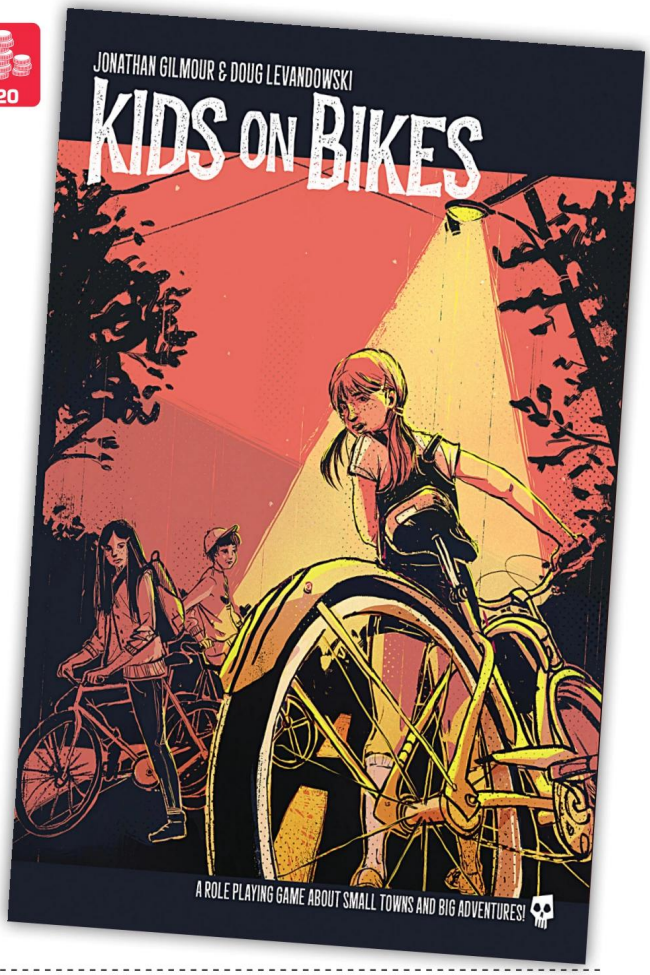
While it wouldn't be fair to describe *Zweihänder* as a clone of the old *WFRP* games, you could probably describe it as a younger, modernised cousin.



KIDS ON BIKES

Designer: Jonathan Gilmour, Doug Levandowski

74 | 11+ | £20



There's a monster in the woods, black helicopters are lurking on the horizon and the weird kid in history class can move things with her mind. If the movies have taught us anything, it's that the only people with a chance of getting to the bottom of these mysteries are a plucky band of kids with beaten-up bicycles, outdated slang and a whole lot of moxie. Whatever that is.

Kids on Bikes propels the players into the dusty trainers of such a group of kids – and possibly a couple of friendly adults – as they puzzle through the dangers of their hometown. Depending on how people are feeling and what comes to mind during regular bouts of collaborative worldbuilding these dangers can swing between the lighthearted adventure of *E.T.* and the creeping horror of *It*, and one of the system's biggest strengths is how it approaches these kinds of decisions.

From the very first page, *Kids on Bikes* makes it clear that this is a game where everyone at the table is expected to bring their own ideas and storytelling to the table. The GM acts less as an overlord and more as a moderator, deciding which threads to run with and how they weave together. When the time does come to roll some dice, the mechanics aren't particularly deep but are easy to grasp.

This collaborative, rules-light approach to roleplaying is the defining characteristic of the entire game, with the strongest example coming in the form of its 'powered characters' – the friendly alien, pyrokinetic drifter or other supernatural outsider that often lies at the heart of these stories.

Every group is expected to run into one of these figures early into their game, and from then on the players and GM share control of them. This is where the complexity comes into play – not in terms of rules and mechanics, but in requiring everyone to play along and put some effort into crafting an enjoyable story.

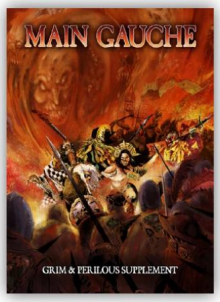
If that sounds like something you and your friends could play with, *Kids on Bikes* is a neat system that can generate some fascinating stories.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

MAIN GAUCHE

Designer: Grim & Perilous Studios

360+ | 13+ | £39



When you consider that the original rulebook ran to almost 700 pages it's hard to imagine that the grimdark world of *Zweihander* could possibly need more content, but this hefty little supplement proves that there's always room for more weird and wonderful ways for characters to doom themselves.

Where other books out there dedicate themselves to certain themes or setting, *Main Gauche*'s selling point is that it offers more. More professions, more spells, more weapons and armour – more everything really. It's not the most inspiring theme out there, but it's fun as hell and able to slot into all whatever dark and messy campaign you have planned.

Within its pages you'll find rules for brewing up *Witcher*-inspired mutagens, for running battles atop speeding stagecoaches, for firing arcane flamethrowers and riding aboard zeppelins. There are dozens of new professions – the closest thing *Zweihander* gets to classes – to pick from, though for several of them it's not hard to see why many of them hit the cutting room floor on the first pass. Not because they're bad ideas or poorly written, but rather because they could be challenging to toss into a game with brand-new players and GMs.

The Reaver, for example, has special rules that dictate they are always afraid of the sea, while a randomly rolled Nomad is going to fare rather poorly indeed if your entire campaign is set within the walls of a city.

You could certainly argue that dealing with these kinds of issues is what makes the chaos-loving game fun, and if you've already played enough of the core game to be interested in a supplement these hurdles shouldn't faze you too much.

In fact, this rather neatly sums up the entire book. If you're brand new to *Zweihander* it might be worth holding off until you're happy to add in the extra chaos *Main Gauche* brings, but if you've already fallen in love with the gritty horrors of the core game the new book just offers so much that it's impossible not to recommend.



RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

PLAY IT? YES

WE ALL FALL DOWN

Death is always an occupational hazard of the professional hero, and when one of the team falls in battle it's a tragedy, but one we can move on from. But when it happens to the entire party at the same time… well, that's something different entirely

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Modiphius**

Here, I speak from personal experience. In this case, there were a few contributing factors. For one, the party was a little under-staffed for the challenges at hand, consisting of only three members rather than the four to six that were usually expected to raid the dungeon.

For another, their luck wasn't the strongest that day. Many – if not most – of their sword strikes and spell blasts whiffed entirely, while the monsters they faced were a shade more accurate than usual. Not hugely, but enough.

Finally, and most importantly, they kept making dumb decisions. The kind of decisions that actually seem like a clever idea right up until the moment you actually act on them.

For example, having the party's wizard leap down a hole in the hopes of scaring away the demonic cultists lurking at the bottom. A hole that was deep enough to render him unconscious the moment he landed.

Having the paladin repeat the feat, to unsurprisingly similar effect, was dumber still.

From there, it was all over bar the chanting and ritual sacrifice.

With a few strokes of a bone knife and a chorus of chanting voices, the mighty heroes fell for good. Their story was over.

TOTALLY TERRIBLE

If you hang around in RPG circles long enough, you'll probably find yourself caught in a discussion about the dreaded Total Party Kill. This term is a catch-all for situations where the entire party falls at the same time, whether killed, captured or ambiguously unconscious.

More often than not this is the result of a combat round that has gone wrong, or possibly one that was so far out of their league that there was no way for it to go right. However, I've also heard of at least one campaign that ended because the heroes' ship smashed into an asteroid at just shy of light speed. You never know when these things might crop up.

Now, some GMs seem to wear their streak of crushed campaigns as a badge of honour. It's a sign they run tough, challenging games with real consequences for mistakes and sloppy planning.

Many others, however, view it as something to be avoided at all costs. After all, very few epic stories of heroism end abruptly in the middle of the fifth chapter when the storyteller accidently threw a super-powerful monster at them.

> "one of the best ways to start smoothing out our GM's life is to make sure that we're playing someone that will actually do things"

THUMBS UP, THUMBS DOWN

As nice as it would be to declare once and for all that one of these approaches is the right and the other wrong, the beautifully fluid nature of roleplaying games makes this something approaching impossible.

For one thing, different games naturally bring different expectations to the table. If the GM is holding a rulebook with the words 'grim,' 'gritty' or 'brutal' in big letters on the back cover, you should probably head into every session ready to roll up a whole new campaign at the end of the night.

The general tone of the table should also factor into how cavalier an attitude we hold towards total party kills. Simply put, some groups just don't like the idea of their heroes losing and the adventure drawing to a close.

Finally, there's the blind, idiot hand of random chance. No matter how much you plan on setting the party up as heroes of the story, there's always a chance that they make some bad decisions and get hysterically unlucky.

The fact is, however, that if you're running a game with some equivalent of permanent character death baked into the rules you should probably spare a little thought to the possibility of a total wipe. Having at least some rough outline of what your approach might be is the best way to avoid making panicked decisions that might fracture your plans for an entire game.

BIG NOPE

Of course, if your approach to the party being reduced to a smear on the dungeon wall is to simply warm up your hands in anticipation of tearing up a whole load of character sheets, you probably don't need too much in the way of planning. But just remember, not everybody is always going to have the same casual attitude to minced player characters that you might.

If, however, you're the kind of GM who prefers to keep at least a few of the heroes kicking, there are a few ways to keep things ticking over and keep the campaign running.

Perhaps the most popular of these is to wave your hands and declare that the fallen heroes were actually captured rather than killed outright. Instead, for the next session they wake up in a dank, dark cell with their injuries bandaged up and their fate thoroughly murky.

This is an RPG cliché, but that's for a damn good reason. It strikes a balance between having real consequences for failure – the party get their gear pilfered and are locked in jail – and keeping the story running. If nothing else, this rather neatly sets up your next few sessions for you. After all, everybody loves a prison break.

Sometimes, however, this isn't really an option.

The evil cult or vampire coven might be interested in harvesting prisoners for juicy blood and juicer information, but a randomly rolled-up pack of lions are unlikely to be so courteous as to tie them up first.

Similarly, while it isn't too much of a stretch to hand-wave a killing blow into mere unconsciousness in the midst of a tangled melee, this gets a little trickier if the party were tossed into the void of space or immolated by a dragon's fire.

We've all heard of superficial cuts, but superficial incineration isn't really a thing.

In these situations, saving the party from their doom requires you to get a little more creative and a lot more obvious. This is the time to invoke the ol' deus ex machina – which is a rather fancy way of saying pulling things from thin air.

Perhaps the lions didn't tie the party up, but the band of hunters who stumbled across them at the last minute sure did. If they want their freedom, they first need to carry out a morally dubious mission on their saviours' behalf.

The more extreme things are, the weirder your interventions need to be. Having gods and demons appear just as the dragonfire blossoms towards them, offering salvation in return for service, can get you out of almost any bind imaginable.

However, this does come at a rather steep cost.

LET IT DIE

I mentioned earlier that there's no single best approach to navigating the bubbling waters of total party kills. However, that doesn't mean I don't have a personal preference.

When it comes to most traditional games – those that include risk as part of the package but don't focus on gritty, bloody lethality – I try to avoid wipes where possible. However, if one slams its way into the narrative, so be it.

The power the GM holds over the game world means that you can keep the characters trucking their way through the story no matter what happens. You can invoke gods, bend rules and roll back the clock if that's what it takes.

However, every time you do so, you chip away at the foundations of the story. Sure, stories don't tend to end with the main cast being eaten by spiders, but having unexpected allies leap from the shadows every time things get rough isn't exactly great for the narrative either.

This is an area where you need to feel out the mood of your group before doing anything dramatic. However, I'm glad that I can share the story of the *Pathfinder* group that dropped two-thirds of the party down a hole with a smile on my face, and the knowledge that before the hour was out the entire group was busy creating new heroes for a brand new adventure.



SUPPLEMENTALLY SPEAKING

Long roleplaying campaigns can sometimes put the drag into dragon and the "I'm done" into dungeons – but never fear, with a pinch of gaming inception, supplemental games can break your party out of its adventuring malaise

Words by **Anna Blackwell**

What draws us to RPGs? The vast journeys, the character growth, the drama, the worldbuilding, certainly. It's an amazing hobby to be part of. However, as a campaign stretches into its second or third year, or you start yet another short game, some respite from the norm is well appreciated. Especially if you're the weary forever-GM with a group of ravenous players to entertain.

Introducing another, smaller, game into the main story arc for some in-game play like *Poker* or *Liar's Dice* in the tavern, or to represent a scene in a different way can be a much needed breath of fresh air. I've taken to calling these 'supplemental games' and they are a godsend for overworked GMs and an interesting change of pace for players too.

Supplemental games, in this sense, are standalone games that have the ability to be incorporated into a roleplaying game. Some of these are tools to be used for worldbuilding, journal writing, or item creation. For fleshing out a world in a generative way that produces some surprises. Alternatively, supplemental games can be games in their own right to replace combat or existing mechanics. If you're ready to spice up your RPG, let the gamesception begin!

POCKET WORLDBUILDING

Coming up with worlds for RPGs can be a momentous undertaking. While it can be gratifying to do, it can also be a bumpy road getting there. GMs and player alike can experience some difficulty in understanding or engaging with vast and detailed worlds. No-one likes getting exposition-bombed at the start of a game just to understand what the world equivalent of a cow is.

However, there is a solution. *Microscope*! The game pitches itself, "You have vast power to create... and to destroy. Build beautiful, tranquil jewels of civilization and then consume them with nuclear fire. Zoom out to watch the majestic tide of history wash across empires, then zoom in and explore the lives of the people who endured it."

In essence, *Microscope* lets you and a bunch of friends build a world and its history through a collaborative narrative RPG. Throughout the game the focus shifts back and forward through time as players inhabit and roleplay characters and add elements to the world. One player might want to include a magical war which prompts another to describe the event that started it, allowing everyone a chance to

roleplay and to get a vivid understanding of that event. Which, over time, creates a strong understanding of the world for everyone. After all, you created it together. This also gives the GM a good opportunity to see what kind of stories the group likes. With the non-chronological nature of the game, you could even set up a terrible event during the world building and have the campaign be the run up to it. Dropping in and out of the *Microscope* can build an exceptionally detailed history.

The only issue is that some groups might not like their precious creations being controlled by someone else. As with all things, discuss it and find a good balance. It might be that having the players have too much say in the world doesn't work for your setting but you want to create something for them to understand and be attached to; something smaller like a city which could be done with *Kingdom* or *Icarus*.

Kingdom puts you all in control of a 'community' and the decisions and threats that face them. As you play, you take on the role of specific characters and see what happens to this community as events play out. The detailed character-level world-building here really helps to make NPCs that players feel like they've known for years. Starting the game with several neighbours they already know and like makes the *Conan* style razing of the village that much more impacting. For anyone struggling to get a campaign moving and to give the players reason to stick together, starting the game with a session of *Kingdom* can raise the stakes. You could play through to the point that a tremendous threat has arisen against your community then roll up characters in your chosen system and hit the road.

> "No-one likes getting exposition-bombed at the start of a game just to understand what the world equivalent of a cow is"

Icarus follows a similar path but with the very specific outcome of 'civilisation collapses' which provides an amazing tool to get a plot in motion. The central mechanic of stacking dice as tension builds creates a wonderfully organic experience where the end is always nigh. As you play you'll see what led to the collapse, how characters acted, and get an idea of what life in the city was like before the end and have the opportunity to say what happened to the characters you played afterwards. Perhaps they are the characters you take on for the story ahead?

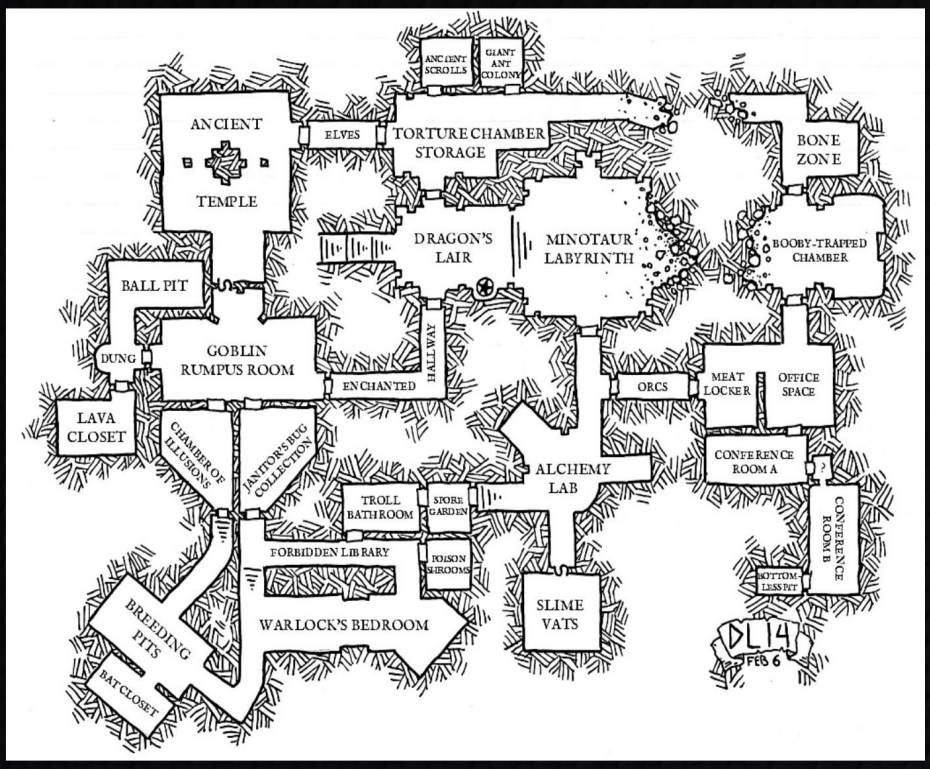
One of the much praised factors of games like *Fallout* is the environmental storytelling. The bits from before the collapse that tell you so much about the lives of the people involved and with *Icarus* you can create deeply understood scenes for the players to come across. Making environmental and narrative callbacks to the choices they made in *Icarus* and picking through the wreckage of that fated city in your campaign can create deeply authentic melancholic backdrops.

MAKING NEW FRIENDS

While world building games are great at fleshing out characters and getting players invested in the world, there are other options to flex your creative muscles. As any long-time GM will agree, making NPCs and items is fun but difficult. And it gets harder the longer you play with a group.

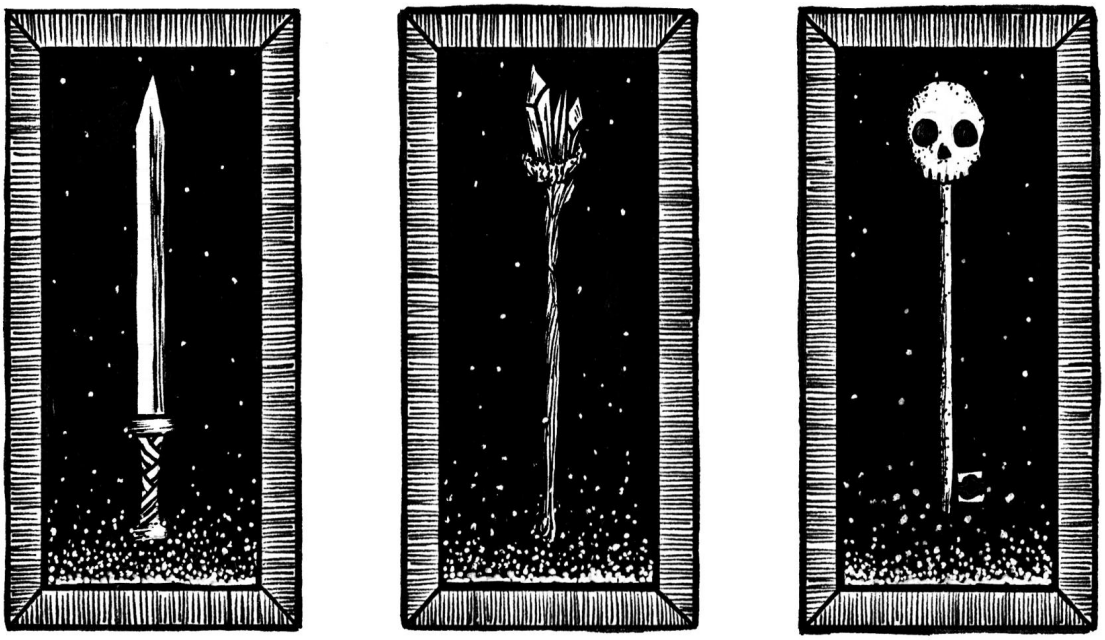
This is where the wonderful world of solo RPGs can be explored (and exploited). One of the most common ways solo RPGs work is through journal writing. Essentially, the game gives you prompts and mechanics to work with and you write the story. The beauty is that, thanks to the prompts, you'll often find yourself going places you would never have thought of.

Such as creating a sword that just wants a hug with the help of *The Artefact*. A solo journal writing game that takes you through the creation and long life of a sentient magical weapon, shield or instrument. It has a deliberately lonely tone and aims to show the effect of being alone in the dark places of the world and the transformations time brings. Think of it like reading the diary of *The One Ring*. As you write the history of the item, you'll find yourself populating your world's past with characters, locations, and events. And at the end, you'll have a unique item with a story to give your players.



LEFT The world before the fall in *Icarus* **ABOVE** A layout that *Dungeon Janitor's Apprentice* can build

SUPPLEMENTAL GAMES



Items from *Do Not Let Us Die In The Dark Night Of This Cold Winter*

You can even make up dungeons using games like the two-player *Dungeon Janitor's Apprentice* which has you take on the roles of the grumpy old janitor and the workshy apprentice. While the game is a bit barebones, more serving as the framework for a competitive argument, it does provide a great exercise for coming up wacky dungeon rooms.

One player takes on the role of the grumpy old janitor telling the apprentice to go and perform some task in the dungeon to which the apprentice comes up with a reason for why they couldn't possibly clean the slime pits, feed the minotaur or empty the oubliette. As you go, you can note down the rooms mentioned and once the janitor gives up or the apprentice can't come up with an excuse, you can draw it all up. It might be a bit wacky and horrifically dangerous but hey, what good dungeon isn't?

DICE FREE CONFLICT

For those of you who've already got your game off the ground and have your setting nailed down, there's still plenty of ways to bring in new play styles. These could be as simple as some tavern games, or you could even take this a step further and challenge players with actual puzzle toys, arcade games, or dexterity skills.

Or you could use smaller games like *Harder They Fall* which puts players in control of towering behemoths or mechs as they battle it out using chains of dominos. As the players fight, they place, move, or remove dominos depending on what powers they've used and narrate the effects accordingly. Once they get the chance to unleash an attack, they topple their chain, basing the power of the attack on how many dominos fell. The only downside is that the prompts create a very specific type of narrative that might not fit everyone's style. However, the narrative elements of their fight might help to bring story and emotional context to the destruction of the city or, at the very least, provide a different form of combat to truly differentiate it from a regular fight.

Then there are games like the extremely post-rock titled *Do Not Let Us Die In The Dark Night Of This Cold Winter* which describes itself as a 'minigame' for RPG play. The goal is to help a village survive through a desperate winter after their supplies have been stolen. Over the course of the game, the players help search for food, fuel, and medicine while dealing with random events that can throw a wrench in even the best laid plans. And while the survival elements are fairly mechanical, the focus is kept on role-playing as each villager is named and their ailments tracked, the village mapped, and, players encouraged to talk in-game with the village elder and other characters.

While we have barely scratched the surface, as there are hundreds of games like these out there, we hope you'll want to start exploring the world of supplemental games. Using them can make your locales, items, characters, and plot that much more impactful and varied. And handing over some of the creative control to the players can really help get them more invested. So go wild with it, and put more games in your games.

THE ARTEFACT
by Mousehole Press
ttgami.ng/artefactgame
Tell the tragic story of a magical item as it passes through the ages

DUNGEON JANITOR'S APPRENTICE
by Sorry Not Sorry
ttgami.ng/janitorsapprentice
Collaborative dungeon making through the power of excuses

MICROSCOPE
by Ben Robbins
ttgami.ng/microscope
The gold standard in collaborative world building

KINGDOM
by Ben Robbins
ttgami.ng/kingdom
Lead a community in any setting you desire

ICARUS
by Hunters Entertainment
ttgami.ng/icarusgame
Explore the last moments of a fated city and desperately try to make a difference

COLD WINTER...
by Cone of Negative Energy
ttgami.ng/coldwintergame
Help a desolate village survive the winter in this boardgame meets RPG minigame

HARDER THEY FALL
by Jay Iles
ttgami.ng/hardertheyfall
Battle giant beings through narrative prompts and chains of dominoes



DUNGEONS & DRAGONS: GHOSTS OF SALTMARSH

Seafaring scenarios that won't leave you salty

Designer: Wizards of the Coast | **Artist:** Various

256 | 13+ | £39

From ghost ships and smugglers to shark-people and kraken, this seaborne supplement for *D&D*'s fifth edition cheerfully plunders the long list of nautical clichés to craft a half-dozen quests that – though they may not have the world-shaking consequences or careful plotting of other campaigns – offer a pirate king's hoard of swashbuckling excitement.

Rather than a central villain to overthrow or dire threat to battle, the scattered adventures of *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* are linked by their connection to the sea and the bustling port town of Saltmarsh. Each of them is chunky enough to last at least a couple of sessions of fun and provide their own little arcs of excitement and explanation, whether that involves raiding a sinking ship or negotiating with marsh-dwelling lizard folk.

Like 2017's *Tales from the Yawning Portal*, each of the individual quests is a reimagined take on a classic adventure from *D&D*'s history. Where its predecessor kept each of its dungeons neatly separated from the others, *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* puts some effort into working them into a more-or-less functional campaign.

The slight hesitancy over this comes from the fact that you probably won't be able to take the book as it is and run smoothly from the first page through to the final one. If you look at the recommended levels of the individual adventures you'll spot a few gaps here and there – even if they all lined up, the nature of RPG parties means you'll probably have to take diversions into unmarked waters anyway.

Fortunately, the designers have planned well for this; there are plenty of tables, maps and adventure hooks to lead you off the beaten path with comparatively little pain. Everywhere you look there are diversions and missions to occupy a party for a few days or interesting NPCs for them to befriend. The stage is set for political manoeuvring within the town of Saltmarsh, or you could choose to ignore this in favour of more battles against pirate princes.

Importantly, the need for these diversions only really begins to appear once the party have a few adventures under their belt. Hopefully by that point everybody should be more comfortable with the idea of going off-script; it's very unlikely that newer GMs will be forced to pull together something entirely original. Once you feel comfortable in the setting and the rules, there's some truly impressive scope for expanding things how you see fit.

Of course, there's nothing forcing you to run *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* with a campaign in mind. Most of the adventures work wonderfully as one-offs – though a trio of the earlier examples feature direct links that can be awkward to work around – and are kept generic enough that it's the work of a few minutes to slot them into any campaign or quest that happens to head seaward.

Even if you don't use any of the adventures at all it may still be worth picking up the book for its lengthy rules on sea combat, sailing and battling underwater beasties. These really add to the windswept nautical feel of the tome; simply upgrading a ship until it sprouts countless ballistae and magical sails can become the focus of an entire campaign.

The toolbox nature of the rules and adventures provides something new to *D&D*; in many ways *Ghosts of Saltmarsh* works best when it's used to provide a backbone to your own homebrewed campaign rather than as a completely self-contained unit. Most kitchen-table campaigns end up carving out their own stories anyway, and few pre-written adventures suit this quite as well as this one.

If you're looking for something that will constantly force the characters into action the more focused *D&D* campaigns may suit you better, but if you're comfortable with letting the players stumble their way into dramatic finales this latest book will set you on a course for many months of smooth sailing.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

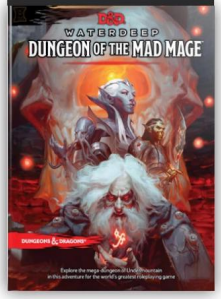
PLAY IT? YES

If your group has any interest in seaborne adventures this is an easy buy, whether you run it as a campaign on pinch adventures or ideas at your leisure.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... D&D – WATERDEEP: DUNGEON OF THE MAD MAGE

If you enjoyed the chance to peel dungeons off from *Mad Mage* you'll love doing it with *Ghosts of Saltmarsh*.



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

PRE-WRITTEN PLANNING



We explore the myths at the heart of using pre-written campaigns, and whether it'll really save you more time than just sketching a campaign out on the bus on the way home

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**
Art from **Lost Citadel**

Do you want to know something kind of embarrassing? At least, something embarrassing for someone who gets paid actual human money to write about roleplaying games.

Until about a year ago, I'd never actually run a pre-written campaign.

Oh, I'd played plenty of one-shot adventures, dropped several borrowed quests into home games and cannibalised countless campaign chapters for cool ideas. However, when it came to longform campaigns I'd always fallen back on writing my own material – or, at very least, sketching out my own ideas and then filling in the gaps with content I'd filched from elsewhere.

This all finally changed when one of my regular groups needed something new to play, and decided that we were all rather taken with the idea of trying the (at the time) brand new *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign – *Waterdeep: Dragon Heist*. They were taken with the idea of an urban campaign; I was intrigued by the prospect of playing around in a city I'd only ever encountered in the *Lords of Waterdeep* boardgame.

Don't worry, though, this isn't going to be a thousand-word ramble about how swimmingly everything went. That's because as soon as we started running things more-or-less from the book, it soon became clear that running a pre-written campaign was rather different than what I was used to.

FAILURE TO PREPARE...

Honestly, perhaps the most surprising thing of all was that I still needed to prepare for the sessions at all. After all, one of the big draws associated with using established material is that it slashes away at the GM's workload.

And, to a certain extent, this is true. Once we switched over to *Dragon Heist* there were no more maps to draw, no villains to dream up, no tangled motivations to ponder on walks round the park.

However, it soon transpired that turning up at the table with the campaign book in one hand and a whisky glass in the other didn't always work out for me – or for the players – in quite the way I'd hoped. Instead, it led to mistakes over NPC's names, badly explained plot points that needed to be bodged further down the line and a handful of embarrassing corrections that re-wrote bits of the universe we'd been building together.

Worst of all were the long, agonisingly awkward pauses that hushed the room as I read through material I'd only skimmed over once or twice before.

Thankfully, after a few rough sessions, things started to run a little smoother. Some of this was simply getting past the teething stages of a new campaign, but a fair bit was because we were slowly developing a new way for us to prepare.

Perhaps the most important part of this was the simple fact that I was bothering to prep at all, but even then the process of writing up notes and sketching down ideas flowed very differently than it did when I was running an imagined campaign. It was faster, for a start, and more focussed. It was less about thinking up things for the players to do and places for them to visit, and more about making sure that I had the right information at my fingertips.

Some of this process is likely unique to me, my personal GMing style and how my brain works – or, occasionally, doesn't. But there are a few tips that should help anyone speed up and focus their preparations for running pre-written campaigns.

NOTES AND NAMES

It might sound a shade dumb, and perhaps rather trivial, but one of the most important parts of getting a session running smoothly is to make sure you have all the names you might need to hand.

Yes, this is a useful thing to have in home-brewed worlds too, but at least when you're only running from your own mind and your own story there's more leeway to make things up on the spot or pull from a handy list of random monikers. Having to make little notes throughout a book because you accidently renamed a vital NPC "Brian" in the first few sessions is more than a shade embarrassing.

For this reason, it's always a good idea to scribble down the names and maybe a tiny little description of the important characters your heroes might meet the forthcoming session. Many times this can end up being a little redundant – you probably have the relevant pages right there in front of you – but when it allows you to smoothly answer a question without pausing to scan the book, it'll feel worth every moment spent on it.

READING LIST

This does rather raise the question of knowing which of those NPCs are likely to pop up in a given session. Well, there are two major parts to this. The first is making sure you give the content you're likely to be running a decent scan through; the second is talking to your party about their plans.

Again, this perhaps sounds obvious, but it's amazing how much smoother things go with just five minutes of reading. If nothing else, it makes it much easier to improvise and slip neatly on and off the beaten path if you know the biggest and most important story beats.

This does depend on your knowing what the party is likely to be doing in the upcoming session, and while this is often fairly obvious – if they were half-way through a dungeon last time, you can probably safely assume they'll try and get to the end this time around – it can sometimes be rather tricky to predict, especially in more open-ended, sandbox-ey campaigns.

In situations like this, often the best thing to do is to simply ask your players what their rough plans are before you settle in to do your prep. This is especially easy to do in an age where so many tables are organised through WhatsApp groups or Discord servers, where all your players are only a few swipes of a thumb away.

Some GMs have an understandable aversion to doing this, as they feel that it undermines their hard-earned air of divine knowledge and perfect planning, but from personal experience it's a wonderful time-saver. And it's certainly better than working hard on a scene which simply won't happen.

> "The most surprising thing was that I still needed to prepare at all"



CUT & PASTE

Perhaps the most important part of thorough preparation, however, is making sure that you have a decent idea of what you're going to cut out and what you might add in.

Okay, that might seem a little crazy considering that the entire point of this piece was taking about running games out of pre-written adventures, but the nature of any tabletop roleplaying game is that things change fast when you hit the table.

Indeed, one of the joys of running a published campaign lies in making it your own. There's a real joy in tinkering with plot points and promoting minor NPCs to positions of great importance, just because they hit it off with the party.

More than this, cutting some bits out and changing others allows you to tailor things to work better with your group. Even *Dragon Heist*, which the table thoroughly enjoyed, had several sections that we altered radically because it seemed to fit the mood a little better.

Sometimes you can make the decision to slash out a section or two in the heat of a session, but it really does help if you make these decisions in advance, while you're prepping for your game. If nothing else, it allows you the time to double-check that you aren't excising the plot equivalent of a load-bearing wall.



GENESYS: REALMS OF TERRINOTH

Solid, generic fantasy for a solid, generic system

Designer: Tim Cox, Tim Huckelbery, Katrina Ostrander | **Artist:** Various

261 | 13+ | £38

One of the selling points of the *Genesys* system was that it allowed you to play in any weird and wonderful world you desired. While it may seem as though a setting book like *Realms of Terrinoth* would limit this freedom, the new options, rules and ideas it offers just expand the GM's toolbox.

Make no mistake, Terrinoth – home to several existing Fantasy Flight games – isn't exactly the most exciting or original setting out there. It's a world of fire-breathing dragons, noble heroes and scheming wizards that will feel instantly familiar to anyone who's dabbled in *D&D* or sunk a few months into *World of Warcraft*, with no shock twist or unique gimmick pushing us out of our comfort zones.

That isn't necessarily a bad thing.

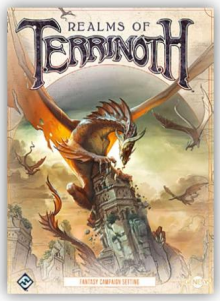
The generic nature of the world means that you can bend the ruleset to fit your wild and wacky campaign about sky-pirates, subterranean spider-warriors or immortal champions and still make use of almost everything in the book. At the same time, if you want to run something a little more conventional, there are plenty of story threads and fantastical locations already set out for you to play around with.

A vital part of playing in a fantasy world is creating your own noble heroes and heroines, and most of the new mechanics introduced in *Realms of Terrinoth* offer new options to characters. These include the chance to play as orcs, elves and even catfolk, plus a whole set of setting-appropriate careers – the rough equivalent of classes – that replace those found in the core rulebook. One welcome addition, when compared to many other games, is that not all the careers on offer are combat-focused, so a scholar or diplomat can offer just as much to the party as a warrior or mage.

Beyond this, the new options continue the trend of easy customisability found in the basic version of *Genesys*. Within the space of only a dozen or so pages you can find rules for modifying weapons and armour, brewing alchemical potions and working with magical runes, while another section lays out the benefits that a wand fashioned from bone will offer over one carved from willow.

None of these minor rule updates or options are particularly deep or complicated, but they provide so many little ways to tweak how a character feels and plays. With a little imagination, the correct combination of talents, skills and equipment can allow players to create virtually any kind of adventurer they can imagine.

This broad-but-not-too-deep trend continues with the array of stat blocks included for new allies and enemies alike. These are grouped up according to region, with the desert-based assassins appearing alongside djinn while elven archers sit with evil fae. While this doesn't always make it easy to find the specific creature you're looking for in the heat of an encounter, it works well for throwing things together on the fly based upon the adventure your party is embroiled in.

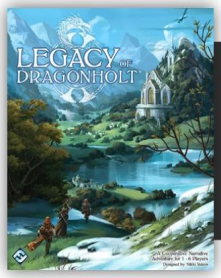


The difficulty of navigating the book may in fact be its greatest flaw, as much of the vital information you would need to consult on a regular basis is all kept in one chapter right in the middle of its 260-something pages. This isn't anything that can't be solved with a bookmark or a well-placed thumb, but it is perhaps a sign that *Realms of Terrinoth* is absolutely stuffed with lore and history.

For some people this will be a wonderful excuse to sit down and plough through the background of this competently-crafted fantasy world, but for the rest of us the sheer quantity of lore on offer is a little bit overwhelming. Perhaps that's an unfair criticism of a setting book, where the world it sets out is one of the selling points, but it's hard to see what too many gaming groups will be able to get from the details of Eleanor II's role in the Great Goblin Uprising of 997, for example.

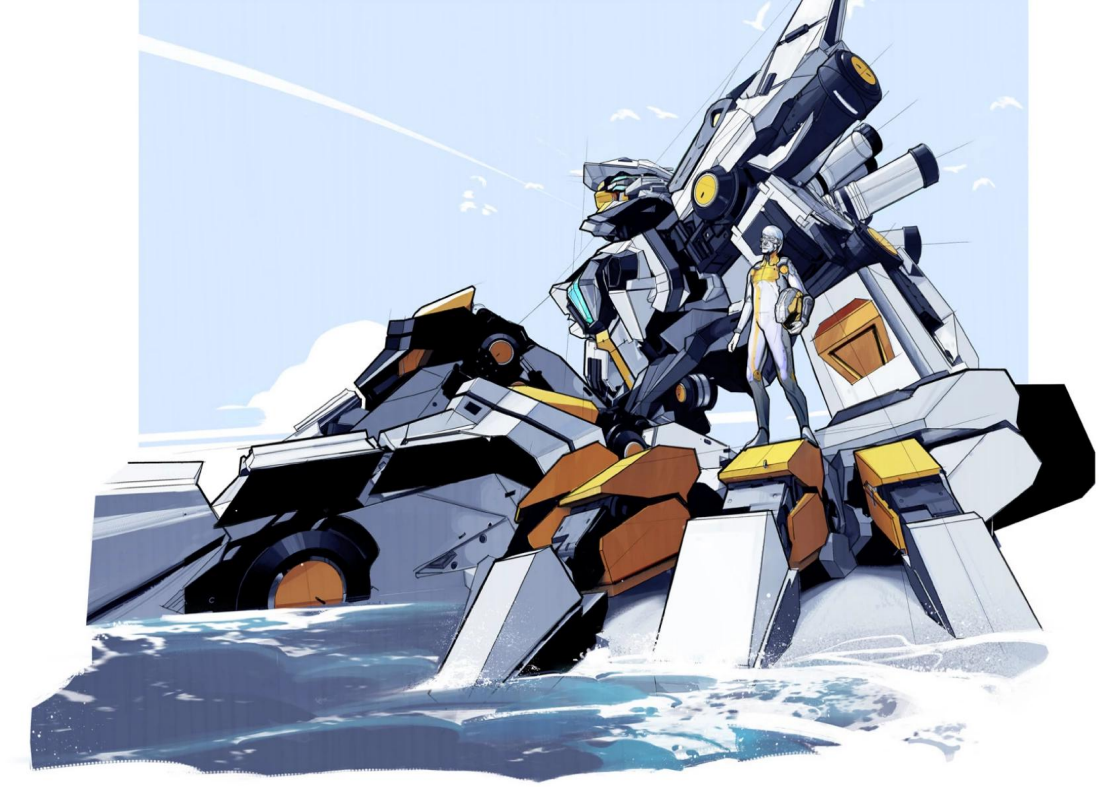
If you've ever wanted to play around in the world of *Runebound*, *Runewars* or the recent *Legacy of Dragonholt*, this should be an instant purchase. However, even if you don't have any existing connection to the world of Terrinoth and are looking for an alternative to the big boys of the heroic fantasy market, you could do much worse than picking this up alongside a copy of *Genesys*.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... LEGACY OF DRAGONHOLT

Realms of Terrnioth is set in the same world as the RPG-lite, and allows the party to head out on a near-infinite range of adventures rather than just those prescribed by the book.



GENESYS: EXPANDED PLAYERS' GUIDE

More More More!

Designer: Fantasy Flight Games

112 | 13+ | £28

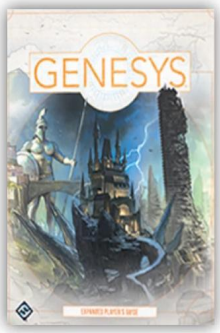
A big part of the appeal of setting-free RPGs lies in their flexibility, and while Genesys has always had a solid base of options to play around with, the *Expanded Players' Guide* doubles down on the scope of games in almost every direction imaginable.

Where previous supplements for the generic RPG have focussed on specific worlds or genres, such as cyberpunk and swords n' sorcery fantasy, this latest book proudly embraces its amorphous heritage. The result isn't instantly exciting in the way a more focussed product might be, but within its modest page count you'll find dozens of little ways to spice up adventures and build new worlds.

For example, when you're just skimming through the rules a lengthy section on how to brew up vehicles may seem a little dry and plodding. However, as you flick through the examples it's hard not to be struck by the wealth of possibilities it brings.

With just a little bit of work you can use the systems to drum up an anime-inspired mecha campaign where heroic pilots batter monstrous foes with giant robots. If you're feeling a little less fantastical you could just as easily conjure up tanks and zeppelins for WW1-era pulp heroics.

Honestly, if you wanted to you could easily just skip over the details for making vehicles on your own and simply fiddle about with the 30-ish sample creations listed in the book. They span everything from war chariots to interstellar cruisers, so there's a good chance that something close to whatever weird airship you feel like grabbing in in there somewhere.



The same could probably be said of the section on building NPCs for players to battle and buddy up with, which focus less on creating creatures from scratch and more on tossing something together from templates. Again, very few of the entries are exciting on their own, but though sticking the 'mage' skill package onto a 'smart person' base doesn't sound exciting it's a lightning fast way to brew up an adversary for your party.

Of course, the GMs aren't the only one to get new goodies to play with in the *Expanded Players' Guide* – which isn't too surprising considering the name. These include some expanded rules for spellcasting and options for social combat, but most of the exciting new stuff is tied to the handful of new settings sketched out in the book.

These include rules for playing around in a *Fallout*-esque post-apocalypse and a mythical age of heroism, complete with options for demigods as player characters, but perhaps the most intriguing of the trio is the so-called "Monster World."

This slightly hand-waved name stands in for creating worlds of gothic and pulp horror – think *Dracula* through to *Underworld*. The ideas it throws about aren't just a great source of dumb fun, but also offer a slightly darker, more dangerous approach to the game.

Within just a dozen pages the *Expanded Players' Guide* offers up ideas for a truly exciting campaign that would have been tricky to cobble together without the new options and items it brings to the table. There's still plenty of flexibility, but it makes it incredibly easy to toss together a game about stalking the streets of Victorian London in search of werewolves, or raiding the lightning-warped castles of mad scientists.

Of course, none of this is particularly original stuff, and perhaps the book's greatest weakness lies in the fact that it doesn't really offer much that you couldn't already hack together with a bit of time and effort. There are rules in the corebook for bodging together monsters and none of the settings are beyond the imagination of a dedicated homebrewer.

However, it would be foolish to ignore the amount of time and effort you can save by simply letting the designers do the work for you – and probably in a slightly cleaner fashion than most of us would manage at home.

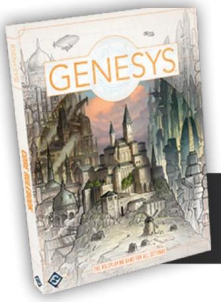
Ultimately, perhaps the greatest recommendation for the *Expanded Players' Guide* lies in the simple fact that it inspired me to start filling up notebooks with ideas for a half-dozen different campaigns. It's debatable whether any of them will get off the ground, but that is both the blessing and the curse of a system as wonderful flexible as *Genesys*.

If you already own the corebook and feel like growing your game, the *Expanded Players' Guide* should be an easy purchase.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES

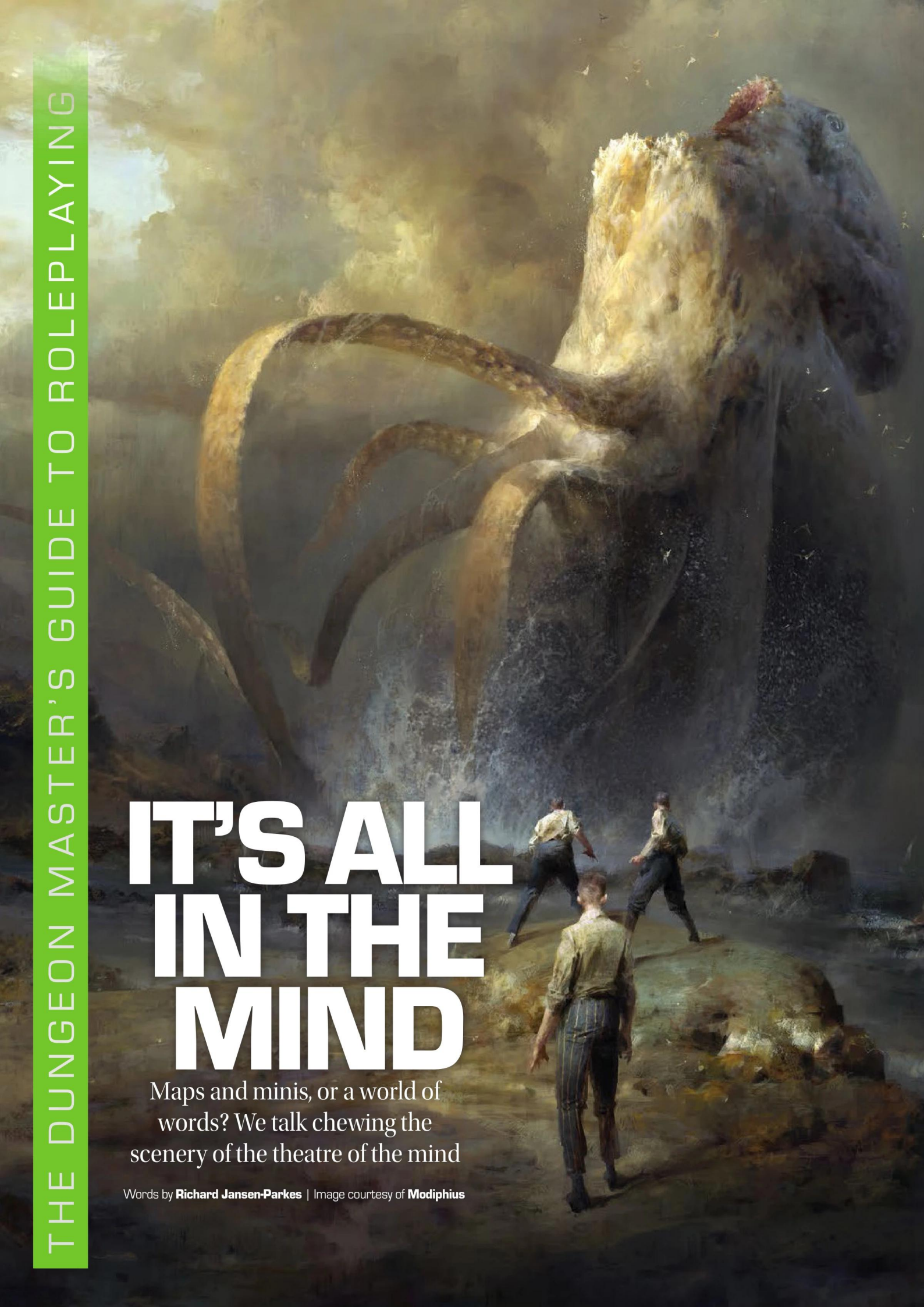
PLAY IT? YES

More ideas, more rules, more fuel for your imagination. Everything you want from an (admittedly generic) expansion.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED... GENESYS

It's not the most inspired choice, but if you are a big fan of the base game there are few better ways to expand your options.



IT'S ALL IN THE MIND

Maps and minis, or a world of words? We talk chewing the scenery of the theatre of the mind

Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes** | Image courtesy of **Modiphius**

Under normal circumstances, I'm one of those GMs who will turn up at a gaming night laden with boxes of miniatures and sheaves of carefully chosen battlemaps. The mere sight of a well-built dungeon packed with monsters and well-plotted sightlines is enough to bring a smile to my face and diabolical thought to my mind.

However, sometimes even I feel the need to ditch the maps and minis. Instead, we play battles out purely through description and discussion – a process generally known as theatre of the mind.

Often this is a matter of practicality. At time of writing, for example, my games are being run exclusively through online video-chats that pile impracticalities upon the use of props. But even if you aren't stuck at home, there are plenty of scenarios that don't lend themselves to a grid, such as a chase through a bustling city street or an aerial duel taking place of the back of giant eagles.

And, of course, some people just prefer to keep things mental no matter the circumstances.

However, if – like me – you started off your RPG career using maps, the idea of trusting everything to intangible words and the occasional hand gesture can be rather daunting.

> "Some people just prefer to keep things mental no matter the circumstances"

SCENE SETTING

Perhaps the most important part of getting a theatre of the mind combat to run smoothly is to make sure you get everybody imagining roughly the same space and scene. Sometimes this is a simple matter of sketching out the dimensions of the tomb and plopping down the mental equivalent of some zombie miniatures at regular intervals, but often it's a little more complicated.

When you're brewing up a bar fight, for example, make sure that the players know that the tables are packed with bystanders before someone tosses a grenade. Likewise, if they're battling alongside a ridge, it's helpful for them to know whether the drop will scuff their knees or reduce them to a pile of red jelly.

The same goes for the placement of any enemies. When you say that red-fanged aliens are charging them from the trees, do you mean they've just left the treeline 30 metres away, or that they're moments away from being in convenient claw-range?

On that note, whether or not you need to measure out exact distances will depend heavily on the system you're running and the circumstances at hand. Most of the time you can get away with keeping things nice and loose – the bad guys are across the room, the tree trunks are decently thick – but games with more tactical combat can sometimes rely on exact details.

In these cases, the best bet is to keep things vague until a player asks for clarification. If they have something cool to do but need a target within range, you can then make a judgement call about whether the enemy would be close enough.

GROUP HUG

Of course, once you have made a call on exact distances, sizes and numbers, you do need to at least try and keep track of them.

This is perhaps the trickiest and most stressful aspect of running theatre of the mind combat. In the heat of combat, even experienced GMs can momentarily forget where entire squads of bad guys are standing and doing. It's incredibly frustrating – not to mention embarrassing – to glance down at your notes at the end of a fight and realise that a couple of monsters apparently vanished mid-battle because you forgot to take their turns.

There are a few ways to handle this, but perhaps the most effective is to group bunches of enemies together rather than trying to track them all individually.

Rather than having a dozen different zombies, each with their own positioning and attacks to make, you instead have the four of them engaged with the fighter on top of the tomb, the five of them fleeing from the cleric's holy symbol and the three of them coming in from the doorway to the east. As far as the rules are concerned, they're all in about the same place and doing roughly the same thing.

THE QUANTUM CHANDELIER

Honestly, although this kind of fuzziness can be a little difficult to handle at first, once you get familiar it can be one of the biggest advantages to theatre of the mind.

For example, if you've ever drawn out a room on a battlemap you've probably stuck a table here, a couple of chairs there and maybe a treasure chest at the back. However, when you're running things with nothing but your imagination those tables can be almost anywhere you like.

The moment someone says "hey, can I grab this guy and toss him through the drinks like a pissed-off bartender?" you can mentally rearrange the furniture so everything makes sense and nobody needs to make grapple checks to get the bad guy in the right position.

This doesn't just apply to moving things around the room either. So long as it makes sense and is reasonably consistent with your earlier descriptions, you can pluck torches, cannons and crystal chandeliers from your imagination and toss them wherever they're needed.

This is something that works best when you encourage players to ask questions about their surroundings and add their own little flourishes to the world. If they want something to set alight you can throw some banners on the walls, if they're after cover from incoming fire you can add a sofa or even a couple of crates.

You don't always have to go along with everything the players want – not every room is going to have a convenient plasma cannon emplacement, for example – but with a bit of imagination you can often get something that feels right and doesn't break the game. While there may not be a chandelier in the dungeon, say, that doesn't mean there can't be a hitherto unmentioned rope keeping a heavy cage suspended in the rafters.

WIGGLE ROOM

One of the nice things about using maps and miniatures is that there's very little room for error. You know exactly where the bad guys are, where the heroes are and what stands between them.

This isn't the case with theatre of the mind. Things are more open to misunderstandings, and this means that sometimes you're going to make mistakes.

For example, sometimes you might think you're being perfectly clear what you mean by "pretty far away," only to realise that a handful of the players seized upon some entirely different meaning.

I remember one early game where the GM and I had a moment of minor confusion over exactly which way I meant by "left." This led to my character – a fierce barbarian – plunging confidently into the woods on the other side of the battle, her warcry slowly fading as she went.

It was a silly, frustrating moment that didn't really make much sense in the world we were building together. Since then I've always erred on the generous side when it comes to letting players call backsies on some move made in error, or to flagging up potential mistakes before they commit to the action.

This is a world of imagination, after all. Undoing mistakes isn't particularly tricky when you put your mind to it.



THE DUNGEON MASTER'S GUIDE TO ROLEPLAYING

DEARLY DEPARTED

Whether they're going out with a bang or falling prey to fateful rolls, should you be unafraid to swing the scythe when it comes to killing off player characters?

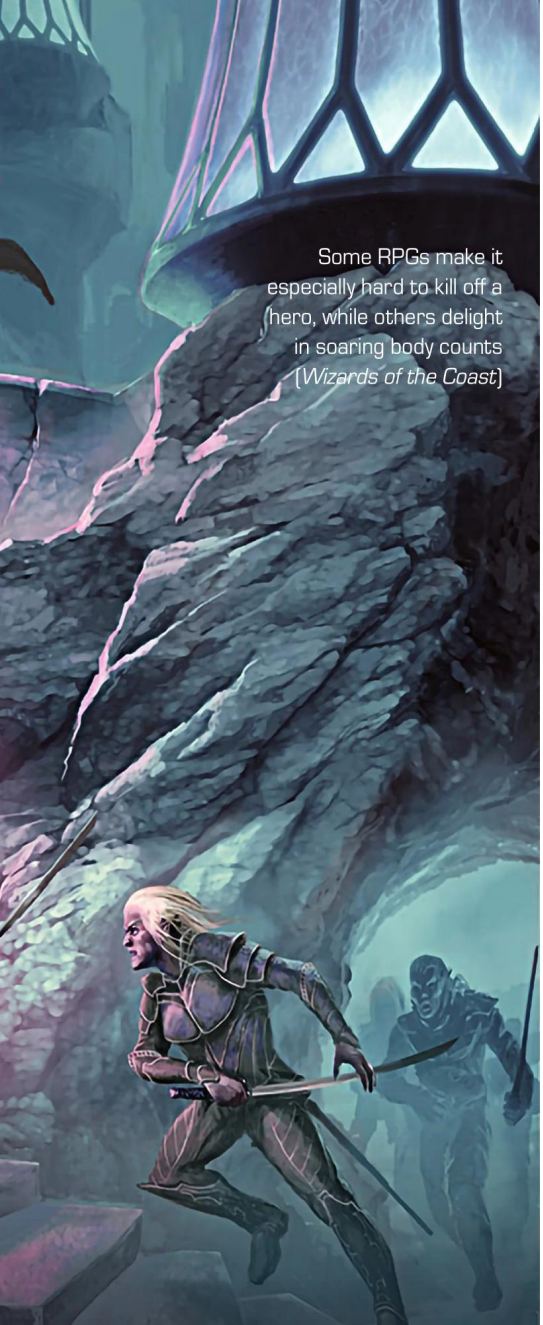
Words by **Richard Jansen-Parkes**

Old Man Zabadar was a wizard of simple pleasures, such as fire, explosions and fiery explosions. It was perhaps inevitable, therefore, that when he went out it was in both a figurative blaze of glory and a quite literal one.

To tell the truth, Zabadar's fate was probably sealed the moment he realised that the mining supplies stolen by a marauding warband of orcs was, in fact, an enormous pile of explosives. While the rest of the party were busy trying to expose the diabolical shaman that was manipulating the clan into greater acts of violence, the half-elven wizard seemed to be tagging along in the hopes of reducing half the camp to a smoking crater.

For a while it seemed as though the heroes were going to save the day with nothing but cunning diplomacy that would leave Zabadar deeply unfulfilled, but a last-minute twist involving a string of terrible saving throws and an enchanted mask spiralled into a showdown between a battered and bruised band of adventurers and the demonically-possessed shaman. The monster made short work of a couple of front-line fighters and things seemed desperate for our heroes until it made the mistake of getting too close to the pile of explosives – conveniently placed on one side of the battlefield.

Zabadar leapt into action with a well-aimed



Some RPGs make it especially hard to kill off a hero, while others delight in soaring body counts (*Wizards of the Coast*)

firebolt. But while his aim was true, he seemed to forget the cardinal rule of setting off explosives: don't stand in the blast radius.

There was a roar of fire and a flash of light, and when the rest of the heroes managed to pick themselves off the ground a few minutes later there was nothing left of either shaman or wizard, save for a strip of his purple robe drifting down from a cloud of ash.

Everyone at the table agreed that it was a stupid, easily-avoidable death. And that it was entirely appropriate.

DIFFERENT STROKES

At the time of writing, character death is a hot-button issue in the RPG community thanks to certain events in the actual-play behemoth that is *Critical Role*. The discussions that blew up in the wake of one particular episode made it clear that different groups handle death very differently.

Some folks who lean old-school are very strict on the fact that losing characters to unlucky rolls is just another part of the game,and that GMs should always be utterly ruthless when it comes to running monsters and other bad guys. If a pack of ghouls get the drop on an adventurer, it's time to roll up a new character rather than try and justify why a horde of ravenous undead cannibals only knocked her unconscious.

Others seem to be determined to preserve the party members at all costs, whether that means bending the rules to turn a death into a serious – but not permanent – injury or simply playing fast and loose with divine interventions and magical resurrections. So many RPGs are about telling a shared narrative, after all – and what kind of story has one of the main characters get offed by a nameless bandit who landed a couple of lucky hits?

Annoyingly, this is one of those situations where there really is no correct answer. The right approach to killing off characters is something that will vary from group to group and from system to system.

In fact, two games I played this month, *Star Wars: The RPG* (read the full review on p68) and *Capharnaum* (p74) have mechanics that make it fairly hard to actually kill off a hero without putting in real effort, and as such are likely to produce fewer bodies than a run through *The Tomb of Horrors* or an old-school *Call of Cthulhu* campaign.

Personally, I've always felt that the most user-friendly approach is to sit somewhere in the middle of the two extremes. I like to let the dice and bodies fall where they may, but always try and use deaths as a method for pushing the story forward rather than examples of random fate screwing the party over.

OF STAKES AND STORIES

'Player agency' is a term that gets thrown around a lot when it comes to designing RPGs and talking about how best to run them. Essentially, it means giving the players a chance to make their own decisions and – importantly – to feel the consequences of those decisions.

When Old Man Zabadar decided to toss a firebolt into a pile of high-explosives, there were several ways that I could have probably preserved his mortal coil. Perhaps the crates of dynamite had gotten wet, or the initial shockwave was strong enough to carry him out of reach of the fiery inferno he had just set off.

If I had done that, however, it would have been obvious to everyone at the table that this was blatant fudging. It would have been the DM stepping in to save the wizard from the consequences of his actions, no different from a dozen different forms of railroading that can pluck the stakes from the adventure.

Even if it hadn't been quite so cut-and-dry, I probably would have let Zabadar bite it there anyway, so long as he rolled poorly and the damage from the explosion was big enough. It was good for the story, gave the party another reason to press on and find out who was behind the shaman's evil magic and felt like a totally appropriate way to kill off the character. When else was I going to be able to give him such a perfect send-off as being caught in an enormous explosion of his own creation, after all?

> "I always try and use deaths as a method for pushing the story forward."

WORSE THAN DEATH

Of course, just because you don't pull your punches that doesn't mean that you have to get a whole new party rolled up every week. Doling out consequences for poor decisions or worse luck doesn't always have to mean hacking a character down.

In fact, there are many things that players fear worse than simply having to introduce a new hero. The loss of valuable equipment is always a good one, especially when it has some sentimental value, and personally I'm always a fan of going after the pets, minions and other helpers that so many parties eventually acquire. I still smile when I remember the moment a minor villain became the most loathed enemy of all time after striking down the paladin's faithful mastiff when it got in the way of a final coup de grâce.

Ultimately, you will know the needs and feelings of your table and with a bit of practice you'll get comfortable making the decision on when the axe should fall and when it's time for a last-minute reprieve. And if you haven't learned anything else from this story, remember to get a decent distance away from mounds of explosives before you throw firebolts at them.

MYTHIC ODYSSEYS OF THEROS

D&D in the lap of the gods

Designer: Various | **Publisher:** Wizards of the Coast

256 | 11+ | £38

Between the capricious gods, mighty heroes and terrible monsters, there's always been plenty of scope for a crossover between Greek myth and *Dungeons & Dragons*, and though it isn't the first attempt made at such a task the *Mythic Odyssey of Theros* does a great job of blending the two together.

With a handful of tweaks, some new character options and a couple changes to the rules, the book creates something that plays like traditional *D&D* but feels noticeably different. Rather than battling dragons and raiding tombs, it shoves players towards epic quests through the underworld and hunts for monsters that sensible folk would ignore entirely. This comes together to create something dramatic; a feeling that the divine challenges and unlikely coincidences that fuel your adventures aren't tired clichés but rather a baked-in aspect of the world.

The world in question is that of Theros, a realm already beloved by the *Magic the Gathering* players who've seen several sets based there. However, even if you've never so much as sleeved up a single spell you shouldn't assume this is a sourcebook to skip, as the setting's a pretty easy one to wrap your head around.

It is, essentially, a riff on mythical Greece, complete with a pantheon of meddling gods and stack of gargantuan monsters in need of slaying. The elves and dwarves of more conventional *D&D* are ditched in favour of satyrs, centaurs and minotaurs, and with them go a whole load of fantasy staples. The gods get a vibrant makeover, going from distant figures of abstract power to dangerous forces that regularly meddle with the world of mortals.

This isn't simply background storytelling either. The entirety of Theros is warped by divine might and this is reflected in new rules that provide the biggest twist on the fifth edition ruleset to date.

For a starter, every character has a chance to pick a special supernatural gift that marks them as champions of the gods. All of these add in flavour to the mix, but also powerful little bonuses that make even brand-new adventurers feel like the heroes they're destined to become.

The extra rules and power don't end with character creation, either, as there's an entire system set up to track a hero's piety to their chosen god. You unlock greater benefits as the game goes on, and what starts out as a free spell or two can quickly become a permanent stat increase as you take on more powerful foes.

If there's a problem with this, it's that it can sometimes feel rather restrictive. Mechanical benefits like these are something players love to carefully curate, and sometimes they may feel trapped into following their gods' wishes. Of course, in some ways this is appropriate – going against the god you've been championing should be a difficult decision, after all – but choosing between a story point and a +2 bonus just doesn't feel great no matter the circumstances.

This is especially true when you think that little bonus might be needed to take on one of *Mythic Odyssey of Theros*' greatest achievements: the enormous pile of monsters it brings to the table.

These beasts are among the best that *D&D* has to offer and offer a huge range of deadly encounters such as build-your-own chimeras and squads of well-trained hoplites. There's an impressive amount of creativity on display, and while GMs may struggle with the fact that many fantasy staples just don't match Theros' tone, the list of new monsters should more than make up for that.

Indeed, if you wanted to you could quite easily pick up the core rules alongside *Mythic Odyssey of Theros* and happily game away without ever sparing a thought for the wider world of *D&D* or even bothering with the base game's basic conceits. In some ways, it feels as though a subtle shift of rules and approaches has found the book a spot somewhere between a new setting and a new game entirely.

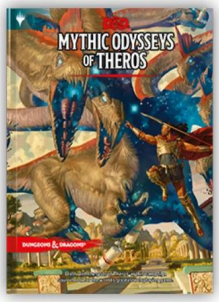
Is it the kind of game you'll play for the rest of your gaming life? Maybe not, but that doesn't stop it being a delightful breath of sea-salty air, and well worth investigating whether you're a *Magic* fan or not.

RICHARD JANSEN-PARKES



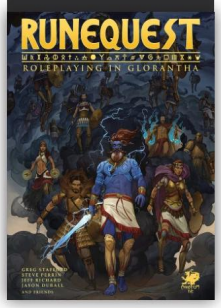
PLAY IT? YES

A solidly constructed way to step away from conventional fantasy tropes and explore a world of myth and legend. We just wish there was more adventure support for it.



TRY THIS IF YOU LIKED RUNEQUEST

If you're after the mythical feel of *Runequest* but aren't so keen on the system itself, *Mythic Odyssey of Theros* offers a great path into spears and sandals



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