

The Silven
Trumpeter
The Official Magazine of Silven Crossroads

d20 Reviews

This month we take a look at the latest releases from WoTC and Mystic Eye Games

Antipodean Adventures

Shane Cubis takes a look at an aboriginal monster in gaming terms
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COVER STORY:

Faith Based Initiative

Eytan Bernstein tackles the topic of fundamentalist misconceptions regarding RPGs

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Sound off!

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

Write to Dana at :
adriayna@yahoo.com

Errata

In our previous edition (Trumpeter 04 - November Edition) we misspelled the name of Chris Pramas as "Chris Paramas" in the contents page of the ezine. We apologize to Mr. Pramas for this publishing oversight.

From the Editor

Welcome to the January 2003 edition of *The Silven Trumpeter*. This issue marks the *Trumpeter's* sixth month in publication. A round of applause goes out to all of our writers, artists, and contributors for donating their talent and their sustained effort to keep the Silven Trumpeter going. And let's not forget Kosala Ubayasekara, the Silven Crossroads Site Admin and Founder, who, diligently each month, works to compile, design, and format the *Trumpeter*. Above all, a special thanks goes to our readers whose continued feedback and support make all of our hard work worthwhile.

When I first accepted the position as Editor-in-Chief a little over six months ago, Kosala told me that he believed we could create a magazine that would rival *Dragon Magazine* by the end of the year. I thought he was crazy at the time, but I kept my thoughts to myself and continued working to improve the *Trumpeter*. Looking back at what the *Trumpeter* has accomplished in the last six months however, I realized that he was serious, and that we are very close to achieving the goal.

The Silven Trumpeter is a reflection of the Silven Crossroads community and the larger online RPG community. Each contributor—be it with the brush or the pen—has added his or her own personal touch to make the magazine what it is today. It is this community aspect that sets *The Silven Trumpeter* apart from other publications. Perhaps it is fitting that this month's feature, by Eytan Bernstein, takes a look at the history of the attacks and false accusations against role-playing games. It is only through a sustained community effort can these types of misunderstandings be finally ended.

On a side note, because of the Holiday season, we have a slightly slimmed down edition this month, with no *Chatting with Gygax* or *Cartographer's Corner*. As always, feel free to contact me with any comments, criticisms, and questions. Happy New Year and happy gaming.

Best Regards,

Dana Driscoll

Dana Driscoll

Editor In Chief
Silven Crossroads E-zine

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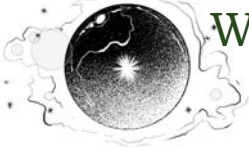
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Gaming Tips by Scott Fitz



When Gamers go Bad #2 : Roleplayers

Can you ever have too much of a good thing? Yes, I believe you can. Most game masters want "role-player" type players. They are seen as desirable player types. They add to the game through character and story. They help develop plots. Yet every kind of gamer has the dark potential to disrupt the game if they take their natural interests to extremes. Role-playing, taken to extremes, can destroy a campaign for a troupe just as easily as any power gamer, rules lawyer, or munchkin.

If you ask GMs about what to do with any of the six types of problem "role-players", they will generally shudder and look away or look at you blankly. The latter group having been lucky as to never encounter a role-player gone bad. There are no rules in the book for the GM to fall back upon to stop them. The GM must use their people skills to help correct the problem. Note: The process of managing role-players is likened to herding cats in its ease and simplicity.

The first step is recognizing there is a problem. Usually this input will come from other players in the troupe, as they will have "less than positive" comments about the role-player player. The next step is to identify what type of problem role-player you have. Once identified steps can be taken to help the player correct the play. You need to know your players, so you can select the best approach for them.

Many people say the direct approach is best. Asking the player to pull back from their extreme is usually the best first step. Bring it to their attention that their style of play is occasionally disrupting the game for others is another good early step. However, some players may take this adversely, so apply these two direct techniques only if you think they might work well for you.

Spotlight Hogs

The most common type of role-players gone bad are "The Spotlight Hogs". These role-play emphasis players want their characters to be the center of attention and the center of the action in the game. Before they go bad, they tend to design/develop characters that are central to the group. By motivating their character, the GM motivates the group. When they go bad, they will do anything they can to get more "airtime", including pushing other characters out of the way.

They will also stop and "chew on the scenery", role-playing minutiae, just because they can. When they are not in the spotlight, they tend to be disruptive and distracting.

There are two main tactics to deal with "spotlight hogs". First you must set down new table rules that restrict distractions and side conversation. Pun Taxes, Whisper rules, Penalties such as docking 20% exp/drama points per disruption of play after a warning (yes after 5 infractions they do not earn any exp), and "no repeat" and "you miss it, you loose it" rules, will all make sure you have a quieter and more focused group. It will also limit and eventually correct for the disruptions a bored spotlight hog will produce. After those are in place, the GM must be strong and apply cut scenes and stage direction to their game. By "forcibly" pulling away from the spotlight character and focusing the game on another character somewhere else, other players get their share of spotlight time. This more evenly distributes the spotlight AND prevents the spotlight hog from being in every scene. *"Yes Bob, you are piloting the ship through the mine field, but we are going down to engineering now to see what is happening there AT THE SAME TIME."* As the spotlight hog reigns back their attempts to be in every scene, reward them by giving the a little more spotlight time.

If you know you have a spotlight hog that has not yet gone bad, give their characters stronger supporting ties to the other characters. This way they are always in the scene, even if they are not the center of the scene. Also remind every player, thus reminding your potential spotlight hog, that no one character can do everything. That way everyone in the group will have their own specialty. Note: Having the table rules AND practicing the cut scenes in place will prevent them from ever going bad (in your campaign) in the first place.

Loonies

The second most common type of role-player gone bad is related to the spotlight hogs. The Loonies start as the role-players that run interesting characters. Interesting characters are normally good things. Loonies players begin running interesting characters that are very "far from the norm" of the group or genre. These loony characters are disruptive to the group (usually based on their personalities), tends not to have useful skill/ abilities, and are only in the character group because of their "PC Status". For example: *A character with make map skill of 0% (less than the default) saying "Hey I want to map. Can I map? Where is the paper? Please can I map?"* Their character is their way to get attention, the spotlight. If you treat them like a spotlight hog, the problem will not go away (though they will be quiet when they are not in the scene). The only way to stop a loony character player is to prevent it from getting said disruptive character into the game. (Once you let it in, it is difficult to get out). This requires the GM to be **deeply** involved in character development. Every character needs to fit the setting and the genre. The loony player's character needs to be reigned in to conform to them. In addition, the character needs to have deep ties to other characters in the group. This gives them a reason to be involved, has other players interact with them, and gives them much of the attention they crave without disrupting the game.

Drama Queens

Most gamers with a role-play emphasis like dramatic situations. The dramatic tension of a scene is what they are playing for. Drama queens (or kings) are role-players who require that EVERYTHING that happens in and around their character be dramatic or melodramatic. This includes such things as buying supplies, meeting random people, and getting up in the morning. These players, before taking things to dramatic and melodramatic extremes, are good to have around because they provide strong and interesting development of their characters, NPCs they have contact with, and game world. They can improve the quality of the game play. However, when they go bad, they dramatize every aspect of the game. If it is not immediately dramatic or melodramatic, they tend to ignore it. This includes story lines that the campaign is based upon. If it is something dramatic, it immediately must be made melodramatic, in an attempt to be more dramatic. This shifting of group focus takes away from any plot lines (and other any other players subplots) running at the same time that are not immediately interesting or dramatic to the player.

But there are a few things to do. You can make sure that every important plotline has an immediate dramatic hook. It will take some work on the GM's part, but it will resolve some of the issues. By shifting the drama queen's character's challenges from a social/personal level to a more tactical physical level, they will have less to be melodramatic about. The herd of cats (i.e. players) can help. Talking to the other players and asking them to "take charge" of their world, by not accepting the shifted game focus of the drama queen can help to resolve the issue. For example: *I know you think you might have food poisoning, but I need to investigate this possible murder now.* If the other players do not "buy into" the histrionics and false dramatics of the drama queen, the troupe can "tone down" the drama queen and shift them away from "having gone bad". Part of a drama queen's problem is the "bad acting" quotient. In games where role-playing impacts the advancement (where role-playing modifies experience earned), simply dialing down those players who are being "bad actors"/ "hams"/ or melodramatic soap stars, and letting them know it is happening, will help reign them in from the extreme.

Actors

Many gamers with a role-playing emphasis begin to think of themselves as actors as rather than mere players. These gamers are normally excellent role-players, who work with the story and help the GM build it up. When this attitude goes to an extreme and "Actor" must be said with a snotty or haughty attitude, they tend to disrupt the game. Not in play mind you, but with side conversations and complaints before and after the game. These Actors have a disdain for rules. They complain constantly and bitterly about "the rules" that thwart their artistic vision and "that they can't do what they feel they should be able to". They are constantly getting their characters in situations that they don't have the skills and abilities to get out of. This feeds the complaints cycle.

Normally these players are so focused upon the performance aspects, that they ignore the "rules aspect" of the game. They tend to avoid game situation that might require them to roll dice or use rules. Because talking is their strength, they only want to talk out situations not wanting to lower themselves to using dice. This also pushes them to chew on scenery and eschew conflict because they can't mechanically handle the dramatic scene. Most Actors only manage the rules with help. One draconic method of stopping them is finding their co-dependent and telling them to stop helping the actor with the rules. Sink or swim at that point. Better methods are available.

One of the best methods to help an Actor is for the GM to get involved in their character creation (or revision). The GM needs to walk the player through the game mechanics so they know EXACTLY what their character is capable of. Once they have a clear idea of what their character can and can not do, they can scale back their character conceptions to fit that. The player will also learn what mechanics they actually want, not what they think they should have: *You mean I don't want professional skill healer, I want paramedic skill?* This process should increase their satisfaction with their character. Once the process is complete, some of other methods are more effective. Page noting, or writing down the page number for the given mechanic on the character sheet, works well. This makes it easy for the player to reference it and know what they can do. The second is to run the actor through more tactical/rules oriented challenges. Success in these situations will reinforce their confidence in the rules, de-emphasize their dependence on acting, and get them back into "the game".

Scripter

Most role-playing emphasis gamers like to have detailed characters. Many of them store this information in their head. Most write out detailed character histories. The best ones of these are packed with telling details and weave elements of the other characters and the game world into them. Others are merely long and filled with trivial details like "hates all cheese except American" (note: which are useless of the GM). People who write up detailed characters often provide the GM with story lines they want to see their character in. Scripters start taking this conception process to a less healthy extreme. They start turning in twenty plus page character histories and more pages of character notes and cue cards. They begin to have a "vision" for their characters. They not only detail out their history, but their future. If the GM does anything to the character that does not fit their "script", they will disrupt the game by refusing to play out these scenes or even interact with the world. Example: *Yes, I know I am destined to marry her, but I am not supposed to meet her for three years after I have slain the dragon. I can't possibly meet her now?*

The warning signs and the solution to Scripter issues are in their conception packets. The GM needs to study their packets carefully. Use your red pen and root out everything that is future dependent. Do not let them script their future, but only give you plot hooks that were attached to their past. Remind them that they can make suggestions to the GM about the types of plot lines they want, but it is a game and the GM needs to run it for everyone.

Role-play Nazis

Some gamers with a role-play emphasis are just "darn good". They are everything you want in a role-player emphasis player. They assist in the story crafting and flow of the game. Having them in play challenges the entire troupe to improve their gamecraft to keep up. These players are probably ex-GMs, GMs to be, or GMs on other nights. These players are a joy to have, until they get one idea in their head—that certain players role-play is at an inexcusable level.

Then it begins.

They begin by telling the GM how badly those people are playing. Soon it shifts to eye rolling and snubs OOC. Eventually it becomes complaints about certain players before, after, and during the game. "They just CAN'T role-play," they claim. They usually just focus on the worst player, but sometimes they complain about the "lower rung" of players in the group.

The solution to this is for them to put up or shut up. You assign them the "bad role-player" as a student. They are responsible for teaching their student how to role-play. They can help them create character conceptions, creating cue cards/ character notes, help them in the performance aspect of their gaming. (Normally the bad role-player is a power gamer or rules monger, so this time mitigates their other bad habits.) The teacher's experience or drama rewards is impacted by how well their student does. This becomes a strong motivational force. They either manage to

teach the student better role-playing OR realize that role-playing is much harder to do than they, the RP gamer, thought.

Something I have had personal success with is teaming up drama queens and actors with the worst role-player in the group (usually the rules lawyer or power gamer). In this case, each player is tasked with teaching the other player their specialty (the power gamer is taught to role-play and the drama queen/ actor is taught to better utilize the rules). Both receive exp based on the other's performance in the given area. This can be tricky to set up and maintain, but results in two players having better gamecraft.

No one expects a role-player type gamer to disrupt a game. That is what makes them so insidious and effective in doing it. When any gamer takes a game interest to an extreme, "going bad", they can disrupt a game and even derail the campaign. The problems that role-players can generate are solvable. If the GM keeps an eye out for the warning signs, the problems can be solved before they become real problems. This allows you to keep having more of the good thing and not the good thing gone bad.

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Humor

by Kou and Ali



Everyone knows of the great classical composers of history: Mozart, Beethoven, Bach, Schubert, etc. These names are etched into people's minds as being the be all and end all of classical music. But what about contemporary classical music—has it dwindled into non-existence? No, but classical music has dramatically changed over the course of the last century. Classical music is no longer limited to a specific way of operating or sounding. An interesting term is being used on the Internet message boards, including at <http://www.soundtrackcentral.com> --Freeform Classical. This is a perfect term to describe most Console RPG soundtracks as well as new film scores. What classical music has become is music not confined to the traditional instruments of the past. Rather experimentation is expected and encouraged. Console RPG music, especially arranged albums, is highly reflective of this trend.

While not all console RPG soundtracks are classical in style, the majority of Arranged soundtracks are. There are three types of main arranged OST (Original Sound Track): fully orchestrated, vocal, and piano. There are also rock, jazz and other types of arrangements, but most arranged music is of the three types described above. What an arranged OST is is the original source song transposed and transformed into a new song. The core of the song remains the same but new elements are added to create, for the most part, a non-synthesized version. The most well known company that puts out a large number of arranged OST's is Squareenix, or rather Digicube, a subdivision of Squareenix which has recently declared bankruptcy. Square's OSTs will be the focus of this article.

Personally, I believe that fully orchestral OSTs are by far the best type one can get. Square has done a great job in the past with fully orchestrated tracks but the releases are few and far between, and I can only recall of two arranged albums released in the last six or so years. *The Final Fantasy VII Reunion album*, which only had three fully orchestrated tracks: One-Winged Angel, Main Theme, and Aeris' theme, and *Final Fantasy VIII – Fithos Lusec Wecos Vinosec*, which has thirteen tracks of fully orchestrated goodness. The *Dragon Quest (Dragon Warrior in North America)* series has also had quite a few fully orchestrated albums released.

Fully orchestrated albums add depth to any track that was previously synthesizer only. "Full-bodied" tracks are an excellent way to describe these tracks. With the advent of new technology, releasing arranged fully orchestral albums is becoming less common as the original soundtracks themselves are becoming increasingly fully orchestral. Two good example of this are the *Xenosaga* soundtrack, composed by Yasunori Mitsuda and the *Star Ocean III* soundtrack composed by Motoi Sakuraba. About half the tracks of each are fully orchestrated or appear to be fully orchestrated as the line between real instruments and synthesizers is becoming increasingly blurred. There are also many non-RPG soundtracks that are becoming orchestral, or at least inspired by orchestral instruments and the history of classical music. *Hitman 2*, composed by Jesper Kyd and *Metal Gear Solid 2: Sons of Liberty*,

primarily composed by Harry Gregson-Williams, a film composer, are two such examples.

A second type of arranged album is of the vocal sort. Vocal collections are just as rare as fully orchestrated. Vocal collections can take two forms: lyrical albums or drama albums. Lyrical albums, such as *Final Fantasy : Pray*, *Final Fantasy: Love Will Grow*, and *Valkyrie Profile Voice Mix*, can create quite a distinct effect for each track. As the albums come almost exclusively from Japan, the language used is primarily Japanese. But again there is a trend towards other languages being used. For example, English is used for some but Latin and other languages are becoming increasingly popular. As players of the Final Fantasy series well know, Square has decided to include a vocal theme, tending to be associated with the love subplot between the male and female lead, to each new *Final Fantasy* from *Final Fantasy VIII* on. While these tracks make some players cringe, lyrical tracks do add a certain depth and character to a particular scene that would have otherwise lacked certain elements had that track not been used. Lyrical vocal collections can be quite beautiful provided the singer does a decent job. The other type of vocal albums are drama albums. These albums usually consist of the narrative or pieces of it spoken within the game or read by voice actors. Drama albums are like the radio-dramas of yesteryear.

The third and final type of arranged OST's are Piano arrangements. Piano arrangements are just that, tracks are reworked for Piano. Piano tracks can add quite a nice amount of intensity to a track or it can make the track tremendously bland. The caliber of these tracks is highly contingent on who is playing, where it is being recorded, the quality of the piano, and the quality of the arrangement. There are some tracks that just do not work well in piano. I find that Piano tracks are an acquired taste as they may appear to be somewhat bland at the beginning but upon repeated listening of the tracks one is able to hear the intricacies that exist in the work. A couple good examples of piano arrangements are *Final Fantasy VII: Piano Collections*, and *Final Fantasy X: Piano Collections*. These two albums especially demonstrate how to do piano arrangements right. The older albums in the *Final Fantasy: Piano Collections* series seem rather unprofessional when compared to the newer albums.

Classical music has changed much over the last century and video games are one of the keys to this change. Film scores and video game music need to be recognized as true classical music rather than constantly being referred to as merely filler. Music is an important element of any movie or game and listening to the soundtrack outside of the film or game should not be viewed askew. Arranged console RPG music is an excellent way in which video game music can gain legitimacy with mainstream audiences. It is still a ways off, though, before video games get the respect as an art form that they deserve.



The Invaders

by Kosala Ubayasekara

Author's note: I wish to acknowledge that inspiration for this short story came from a sci-fi short story that I read many years ago. It was so long ago that I neither remember the author nor the title of the piece.

Tyr Damo stood on the stone battlements of the city outskirts and gazed at the horizon beyond. Dawn was creeping over the desert and the morning winds were catching trails of sand on the topmost ridges of dune crests, whipping it gracefully across the ground. Tyr Damo loved the sand dunes of his homeland. Normally, he would stand here each morning and watch the sun creep from the distance and take over the sky, and he would know a great sense of calm and peace. That was before the monsters came.

For the last week, he had awoken each morning to greet the fearful anticipation that only happens on the eve of battle. For days now they had battled the invaders that launched themselves at the city gates and its walls as if possessed by an evil whose only aim was destroying everything in its path. Every day Tyr Damo and his warriors had beaten the monsters back to keep the city safe.

The old warrior took another moment to savour the warm winds caressing his bare body before climbing down a ladder to meet up with his lieutenants. Long hair, grown white over the years, flowed down to his shoulders and at his belt hung two large battle axes. Cloth breaches provided ventilated cover against the dry winds for his lower body. Tyr Damo was a massive warrior, his age not having diminished his tough physique or weakening the corded muscles that silhouetted his body. Nonetheless, the warriors of the city of Caralas Haven had more reasons than these to respect their leader. He was the one that showed them that only in peace did communities thrive and how to work together for the common good. He was revered both for his prowess as a warrior and his skill as a civil administrator. Civilization came to Caralas Haven only because Tyr Damo had bought it. The city's farming and agriculture, trade and commerce were built upon the ideals that Tyr Damo had drilled into them. "Work together and prosper together," he had said. And he had been right. He was the father of their way of life and they would fight with him to preserve it.

Tyr Damo looked with pride at the young faces that gazed at him. Inexperienced maybe, but they fought for their families and their land with the skill that only someone defending his home knew how to muster. He stopped briefly to watch a neighbour's wife hustle a youngster into the safety of a hut as others rushed to set up water and food pipelines to keep the warriors fed and watered during the coming day's battle. Tyr Damo and his troops had managed to keep the invaders from entering the city proper, forcing them to restrict themselves to battling outside the walls. Better weapons and superior tactics had enabled the vastly outnumbered inhabitants of Caralas Haven to keep the attacking monsters at bay.

The old warrior signalled to the guards on the walls to commence the long range attacks. The first volley of fire-engulfed stoneballs launched themselves from shoulder mounted ejector units and sped towards the invaders laying siege below. The monsters did not seem to have any long range weapons that were effective, but they made up for it by mad tenacity and sheer numbers. But those numbers had dwindled to less than half over the previous days of battle and Tyr Damo aimed to make this the last.

A howl of anger and pain emerged from the invading horde as they fled amongst themselves to escape the fire stoneballs. Tyr Damo signalled the opening of the gate and the warriors of Caralas Haven stormed out of the gates and waded into the fray. The old warrior, leading the charge himself, wasted no time in opening a path in the clot of the enemy in front of them. His mighty arms swung his battle axes in practiced concert coming in first high and then low. The invaders he came up against were battle heartened and skilled but the old warriors skills were up to the task each time.

Dale Damo, the burly first lieutenant of the Caralas Haven defenders, sped past him with a smile and a battle cry on his lips, barraging into an armoured enemy with such force that the unsuspecting invader was lifted from the ground and flung backwards. Everywhere Tyr Damo looked the defenders were prevailing. Even the younger and more inexperienced of his army proved to be a match for the invaders.

Until the sun was high over the sky they fought. Once the invaders had recovered from the surprise of the defenders coming out to them, they began to work in more cohesive units and started putting up some resistance. But the city defenders, with superior weapons and skills were a proving to be fierce adversaries. When at last Tyr Damo stood before the chieftain of the invading monsters both panting and sweat drenched, many bodies lay littering the desert around them. Blood seeped into the ground to vanish in the depths of the sand below their feet, and the noon sun beat down hotly as if challenging them both to take it on. The invading chieftain looked up at the sun and let out a sound in a language that Tyr Damo did not understand. The chieftain hoisted his sword up slowly and charged forward into the last battle he would ever fight.

Tyr Damo threw one his axes at the oncoming figure, who smartly dodged to one side. Faster than the chieftain could expect Tyr Damo followed with his second axe, coming in low and spinning on a heel, putting all his weight into the downward slice. The chieftain found himself hurling forward by the momentum of his charge and landed hard on the hot sand. It was in his mouth and nose and he found it hard to breathe. He tried to stand, but his legs...where were his legs? He looked up in time to see the blade come down between his eyes. It was all over for him then.

All around the defenders of Caralas Haven lifted an arm in cheer. Inside the city gates women and children rejoiced and poured out of their huts to tend to the wounded and begin the restoration of their home.

Tyr Damo looked down at the body at his feet. What were these strange monsters that would give them no peace? What drove these to attack us time and time again for no purpose than to conquer or destroy? Barbaric. Look at them... only two arms and two legs and not even a decent shade of purple.

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Rebels in the Dungeon - Part 2

by Raymond Huling

Synopsis: In Part I, we saw the young boy, Qamus, who had hired a number of guards and assassins to accompany him, treat with the mysterious Skullards, a quintet of strangely attired (or unattired) women, in an abandoned cathedral. One member of the boy's company had been tasked to steal an object for these Skullards, but was followed back to the church by some sort of demonic presence. The women handled this interruption and concluded their bargain with the boy. While the transaction itself remains opaque to his troop, they have continued to follow him southward, towards the desert lands..

Deep in the undercrofts of the famous serai in the city of Palmyra, behind arras after arras, down twisting hallways warmly lit by cressets in which there burns oil scented with eugenin, lie pools and baths of clear, fresh water, inaccessible to all but the wealthy. From the largest and hottest of these lavatoria, a trail of steaming footprints leads across black marble and tiles patterned in abstract mosaics only to disappear in the depths of an intricately woven carpet of red- and gold-dyed wool. This carpet covers the floor of a chamber grand, not in size, but in decorative opulence, and in the midst of its dense confusion of gilt and mirrors, sunk profoundly in the cushions of a giant divan, splays Ghlaf, huge and enormously ugly, the figure of a man carved crudely by war. All his callosities are naked to the silks, and his skin smarts from the calefacients the louting bond-maids had used to enhance their massages. He found their ministrations intensely pleasurable—when they scraped at his scall or scrubbed with their little brushes at his great burls of knuckle-bone, his eyes misted over with delight. Nor did he complain when their fingers advanced nimbly down the path of his arousal. But he'd sent them all away now, in order to rest his aging carcass in anticipation of his favorite's arrival, a courtesan soon to come with all the ease and appurtenances of familiarity. He let his eyes close.

When he awoke, Ghlaf found his circumstances conforming to his expectations, to the word of his demands. Over the hearth, a brandreth had been raised, and from it there depended a pot in which an infusion of several types of leaves and seeds had just begun to boil. This was a decoction carefully attended by a lean and dusky man of about thirty, in his dress and mien of that sad beauty proper to a slave with the grace of a prince. He turned from his potting to raise the lid of an athanor, in the egg of which he placed a small, frangible block composed of an opiate. Leaving this to melt, he began to ladle the tisane from the pot through a filter into a large ceramic cup, reserving just a little to add to the drug in the athanor's retort. With tongs, he swirled the fluid in the tiny glass receptacle and poured it into the cup as well. Over it all he squeezed the juice from several fat black berries and, at last, sucked his fingers clean. Ghlaf stirred and smiled; the dark young man rose and brought the drink to him.

"Why do you answer to a child?"

Old Ghlaf paused at his cup, then drank shallowly and looked away.

"You are the great 'aqid of the north, every winter, when the demons come down from the mountains, you lead your people against them, you drive them off, chase them back to their caves. Why do you now follow this boy?"

"Winter has come to me too, Karis."

"No"—the younger man shook his head, as he took the vessel from Ghlaf's huge hand—"no, you have aged like a hunter, and you deserve better than this mal'un"—this word troubled the soldier's brow; his face creased and folded, dug shadows deep within itself.

"What have you heard? Who has called him this?"

"They say he is cursed." Karis shrugged, as if so simple a judgement needed no explanation, as if it differed in no way from an attribution of height or hue.

"Who says?"

"All the voices of the souk...you know this happens; they say that the brogældor took him from his father. And that he has been taught to consort with devils."

As Karis was speaking, Ghlaf dropped his head to his chest. Everything that he'd paid for his prostitute, he realized had become no more than a crown on the pile of coins of other masters. This man couldn't possibly have come to these concerns on his own; his Karis had been bought. The boy's fate had come to depend on his bruised and bitten lips, and he pressed them together now, whitened them with anger. Why not tear himself from this tangle of loyalties? Why not whisper away the conspiracies that have drawn close to him?

"The boy's gold keeps me warm; but it's true; they took him" Ghlaf said as Karis settled back into a chair, away from this man who had been flesh to flesh with one who has walked in hell. However much he'd sold himself to the depravities of the rich, in order to leave behind the indignities of the poor, he had not been able to trade away the peasant superstitions inculcated in him by his grandmothers. He lived and breathed at that moment but one degree from damnation.

"When I was young, your janissaries used to raid my village from time to time, until we made you wiser; once, they took a boy about my age, not my friend, but I knew him; we didn't get him back until four or five days later; you know what they did to him in that time; often that sort of trial breaks a man for his whole life, and sometimes it fills him with steel; the boy from my village died meek years some time after that, but two hundred years ago, the same thing happened to one of the guthweardes, a prince, in fact; only they had him for several months before his ransom; you know what wrath he had when he took his kingship."

"Kaziglu Bey."

"Yes, the Lord Impaler—"Ghlaf leaned forward until Karis could smell on the veteran the crude soap the women had washed him with; the warrior hated perfumes,—"this boy, all that the brogældor did to him, they might as well have done nothing at all. He leads us and he pays us and he knows more than he should, but he laughs, Karis; he has no...marks. He bears no curse of any kind—" Ghlaf gestured emptily,—"you would never know him from his peers."

"They say he sold his soul"

Ghlaf nodded, "He did, he did. Somewhere in there, in the halls of the brogældor, he met a young girl, one taken just like him. They planned to get out together, and they made a pact"—sweat slicked in Karis's fists—"Two teen-aged lovers who sold their souls."

"For what? What did they get in exchange?" Karis said as he wrung his hands.

"He did it for money...just money; I don't know much about her; I know he betrayed her in order to get free, and that it doesn't seem to bother him."

After two weeks' travel in the desert, the northwoodsman alone of the Valtese boy's company remained a mystery to Hazim and to the other Hammalun. It didn't suit them to bear the burdens of a man whom they'd shared no coffee with, to carry the water of one who hadn't drunk theirs. But, out of pity, they made allowances: he had a sick wife. Not that they'd seen anything of her, as she'd been shrouded for the duration of the journey; but camp talk had brought her illness to light, if not her looks, and they pitied the man.

They wondered at him as well: none of the other women veiled themselves. They exposed their faces to all the men—at least, whenever the sun relented enough to permit them so to do. But they'd been introduced as warrior-maids of the North, a kind of third sex they'd heard stories of before, which mean that even the *ghazu*, the brother-warriors to mere porters such as Hazim, curdled at the thought of touching their alien skin. These women-not-women lived beyond their desires and beyond their prejudice—not so the mysterious one beneath the northron's cloth; her they understood and, while they looked sympathetically at the solemn foreigner, as he ministered to his ailing partner, they envied him as well. They spoke and speculated with each other as to her condition, some claiming that she must suffer from terrible disfigurement, but most allowing themselves the sweet torment of the fable that they had amongst them one of those witches of such beauty that it would kill a man to look on her—why else would an outland bride take up their custom? The stranger had no voice to tell them.

Yet, here the man stood, for the first time unoccupied, almost errant, as the twilight cold swept up from the sand and stone, as Hazim slogged back to his tent, having hobbled the few camels and earned his diversion at last. He didn't know what to say.

They had settled on ar-raa'id as a moniker for him, because they'd learned that he'd wandered greatly in his life—this explained how he'd won such a peculiar and impressive woman, and they knew that he served the boy Qamus as a kind of guide. No one knew his name, nor had anyone attempted to call him by this new one, for his wife's sickness could have made him volatile. Hazim, however, had been drinking for some time.

"Arraa'id...ah..gud eeveeneen tu yu."

The liquor fumed heavily on his breath, but ar-raa'id didn't seem to mind. He smiled at the young badwaa, then gestured at the man's wineskin, "arak-abbalah? ila ayn tethhub ma'al-arak-abbalah?"

The stunned the half-drunk man said, "na'am!" (you speak our language!)

Ar-raa'id grinned broadly and said, "So do you."

"All this time! we never would have guessed it! what the hell!" Hazim shook his head to clear it. He now had the opportunity to provide the answers to certain questions; his friends would enjoy this a great deal. "I'll tell you where I'm going with this date-wine! We porters are getting drunk! Come to the tent! Drink with us! You have been the most mysterious of our guests, and now we'll see who you are!"

He grabbed the smiling northman and tugged him to the four-post black house of goat-hair panels that sheltered the dozen and a half Hammalun.

"Look at this!" He shouted, "Look whom I've brought! Samar, get him a cup! and listen to him! he speaks the language like an imam!"

They all drew up in surprise. "Impossible!—What in hell!—Hazim! You've always been a liar! Why would you say such a thing!" Their protestations continued, though many of them quickly and furiously tried, meantime, to remember if they had said anything insulting within earshot of the man.

"Say something raa'id! Tell them they are fools!" Hazim said.

"But Hazim, my new friend, that would be ungracious, to say such a thing."

"God! It's true!"

This overjoyed them; with a single mind, but with many, many voices they insisted he sit and drink and, above all, speak with them. This he did with perfect eloquence: he remarked on the good quality of their wine and the rightness of the measure of their vessels; he admired the roof panels of their tent, all of them he observed, spun from long and unmixed hair. Nothing could have pleased them more than for this foreigner with the gifted tongue to have recognized this surest sign of their success; the older men, especially, regarded him with renewed warmth—but this reaction seemed as nothing when compared with the delight they expressed when he implied his status as a poet.

"Came one black night gliding the darkness walker...slept the soldiers who the horned hall secured, all but one." So ar-raa'id recited for them a verse of poetry from the north, to which they responded with unhidden displeasure.

"You talk backwards!" They cried, and then inquired as to whether all northern talk followed the same twisted path.

"No, no, we do that only sometimes in our songs, just as your cousins in the cities dignify their poems with rare words, so we distinguish ours with...well, with that."

"We hate the city! To hell with our cousins! You need to learn the odes of the desert! You learn for the first time the real taste and color of coffee; you feel the fire in the blood of the justly vengeful man; and you know the gall of love!"

Ar'raa'id drank deeply as they lectured him, then spat in the fire to quiet them down and said, "Your hospitality has made me brave, my friends! But do you think yourselves the first to have swollen my liver with date-wine? I know your poetry; I have listened to those who know many stories and their lessons have served me well. My friends, I don't mind telling you that a few of your least songs, a few riddles even saved my life!"

All of this aligned quite closely with the ritualised introductions to a story-telling that they had been taught to respect, since before they became men; their quiet took on the intensity of an expectant audience.

He began, "It happened years ago, when I traveled through the mountain country far to the north, even of my homeland. You have heard the stories of the giants that live there. Look at me; you see that I am no warrior; but I am yet a man, and I will tell you how I killed one of these giants myself. I had stopped to rest my wandering feet at a small mining town—you know what I mean by mines because from them comes the ore that city—folk render into steel, which you win from them. In this town, I ate and drank my fill and told tales to the miners and mingled among them; and thus I came to see the most beautiful of their maiden daughters, the fairest woman I have ever seen in all of my life.

"I resolved to have her, of course, to make my intentions known to her that very night, a night before a day of rest and so a night of celebration and feast.

"Among all those who sang and danced between the fires, I showed myself the best, the most admirable, and I saw that I had won her eye. I let my voice ring out above all the others, and there you see I made my mistake, my friends. For the giants of the outer darkness, they hate all music, and my song had found the ears of one of their worst, a bastard of the earth, his shoulders blacked out the stars above the trees, and he came hungry into our circle of light.

"He swept up the townsfolk left and right, devouring them, swallowing them whole, pushing their hands and feet past his hairy lips. He came close on my new love, and she wept and cried with fear. Knowing aught else to do, I sang to him, I sang the cruelest of my taunting songs as mightily as I could, and slowly, word by word, I drew his wrath away from her and upon myself. And then the chase began.

"I slipped down the scarp of the forested hills and he rumbled behind me, snapping great trunks like reeds. Before too long, I felt his fingernails tearing at my back—but at the last instant I came upon one of the pits of the mine, a great wide hole, and I tumbled into it. He came down with me, crushing boulders, splintering stone; his weight caused him to stumble, and I took my chance to slip into one of the black tunnels leading into the hill, one just a little too small for him.

"Then the real game began. He pounded at the entrance, and I mocked him further. It may be known to you that these giants love riddles dearly; it is quite something among their kind to be considered a riddle-master and I chose this as my way to enrage him further. I teased him with your riddles. 'Great stupid one!' I called to him, 'Answer me this riddle and I'll come out for you to eat me! Or you can pound the rocks 'til the end of time, you lumpen oaf!'

"He stopped beating against the hill, so I guessed that he had accepted. I said, 'Seven ones named I ask—'

"The days of the week!"—one of the Hammalun cried out—"I was going to say that! I knew it too!"

"Yes, well, the giant didn't know it, of course, but you could've let me finish it, as he did."—Ar-rra'id admonished them only lightly and with a smile, he continued, "We don't number our days as you do, and this left the giant at a disadvantage. Nothing could have infuriated him more; he roared and thrashed and clawed at the tunnel, even crawling in a little way to try to get at me, but I hadn't finished with him; I raised my voice and said, I ask you for five of a lofty—"

"The five daily prayers! ha!" The men shouted.

"Let him finish! he's telling the story!"

Ar-rra'id let the older men take the younger to task for being a bad audience, laughing only into his cup.

"Go on, go on, Ar-rra'id...we're listening to you."

"Well, of course, the giants don't know your gods, and so they know nothing of the prayers. Once again, he tore at the walls of the mineshaft and pushed himself further towards me. The darkness in there came to be filled with his stench; I could smell the blood of those good townspeople on his breath. But I had another riddle for him. 'I ask you for something that fills horses and she-camels with joy and cheers all the desert lands with love...fair women laugh for it...while anxiety for it brings even the male sand-grouse down from the sky.'"

"Surely he knew that one, ar-rra'id! Even the giants must have children!"

"They do, they do, my friend, but no giant of the north knows the sand-grouse or the camel, and I scorned him for his ignorance. I tortured him and he strove for me; he pulled himself deeper and deeper into the tunnel, tearing off his hide, splitting his fingers. I had only to take a few steps out of his reach and mock him once more; he made one last lunge at me and brought the hill down on himself, and almost on me! Almost, but I'd gotten myself out of the way—only to find myself trapped! Trapped without hope, my friends; I slumped to the ground, it seems that he'd beaten me, too, in his own giantish way, and I decided to give up and die right there in the darkness next to him, but then the sounds of the collapse and of his death throes faded from my ears.

"Without light, I began to listen quite carefully, despite my resolution to quit life beside my foe. After a time, I began to think that I heard a far-off music, a song natural and sweet. In the end, I figured that it made no difference whether I died a little further away from the giant, so I set off to follow this unseen sparrow. This I did for a day and maybe more; it became like a ghost of a thread to me and I followed it carefully in my blindness, ever falling and stumbling, but ever rising anew.

"My friends, don't you know that it was she who sang to me? I followed her voice out of my tomb and back under the stars; for a night and a day and into the night she sang for me, this woman whom I barely knew but loved, and she led me out of the mine."

"Well! What happened to her!" They cried in unison.

"She is my wife of course!"

The wanderer left the men to nod off in the tent, as dawn prepared to burst out of the night and over the sands. He slipped under a couple of the guy-ropes, remarking that they'd been secured, not with iron or wood, but in the traditional way, with oryx horn.

The boy Qamus had insisted that each tent burn outside of it a light of some sort, a lantern or a torch. He didn't know but that some occasion may arise in which he needed to rouse a group of raiders or porters during the night. Ar-rra'id stood now beside the small pot that had been given duty as a brazier. Its embers had nearly lost all their warmth, but he whispered to them a few fiery words, and they soon began to glow, almost with delight. He drew from beneath his cloak a long, inward-curving knife, a khukuri; his wife's weapon. It had a finely seriated edge,

which he quickly drew across the nearest ropes, collapsing a corner of the tent. He then kicked up the brazier, so that its now searing, red coals disseminated across the hairy tent-walls. He pulled up one of the oryx-stakes—the last craft of theirs that he had admired before betraying them—and moved on to the rest of the camp.

The desert had withered Simo at the core, but left her skin unmarred. She remained to all appearance as supple as a willow over spring—or she would have seemed so, could they have allowed her to be seen. What they would do to these desert raiders, however, they would facilitate by maintaining her in mystery. As it happened, her disguise revealed the condition that her face did not: she staggered beneath her veils, turned in her steps like a branch in the wind. Qamus had come for her this night all the same. West of the tents, they huddled together, his three bodyguards watching, Ghlaf with some concern. "I lied to my favourite whore for you, Harra; and now we'll kill the men who guide us."

"Yays" Quamus said. The boy liked the old man; he enjoyed bantering with him and would have tried again to explain why their mission necessitated these murders, but he had no time—dawn would come suddenly.

Simo handed her small knife to him, a strange affair molded from a single piece of some translucent material. Qamus held it carefully in his brown hands; he knew weapon's secrets and mistrusted to cut himself—not out of concern for his own delicacy, but for the knife's. She had collected the sap from a single species of plant, a common one in her homeland, and refined it, boiled it down to a base, to which she added juice from a pungent root. This mixture she had heated again, to the point where it obtained the maximum hardness available to it. She shaped the blade as it cooled, then sharpened it on a very fine whetstone, honing it with her tongue—for, of course, the recipe deviated in no way other than form from that known to the peasants for centuries—she'd shaped a dagger out of candy.

The boy positioned the blade in a direction propitious to the conduction of certain energies, the habits of which had been imparted to him by the studies he'd been forced to undertake. He whispered over it a traditional greening of the men with whom they traveled—*qawm willaa ssahhib*. Then he returned the knife to Simo's unsteady fingers. By the creed of her clan, her weapon would break with her blow; she would either kill or leave herself open to death. Silently, almost without disturbing the sand, she shuffled into the darkness.

Qamus didn't watch after her. He knew that someday, someone would know, and that they would begin to call him traitor, *qamus arradis-sum'a*. But everything he did, he did in order to rescue his lost love; and, in his own purpose, what could that not justify?

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Vision 3: Winter Festivals of Europe

People have always sought meaning for natural events and an opportunity to have a good time. Festivals marked important events, such as Winter Solstice, and people celebrated during the festivals. This vision looks at some of the European winter festivals from ancient history.

Part I - The History

For as long as people have known that the Winter Solstice was the shortest day of the year, it has been a focal point for winter celebrations. The return to lengthening days has been interpreted as the triumph of the Sun, the rebirth of the world and other positive things, a sign that winter would not last forever. The vast majority of such traditions have been lost in the mists of prehistory and we only have echoes of what they once were.

The Winter Solstice was often tied to the victory of the Sun over darkness, showing that once again the Sun's light would return to warm the world and free it from the dark and cold of winter. The cults of *Sol Invictus* (the Unconquered Sun) and Mithris both used their Solstice festivals for this purpose. Symbols of stars, the sun and candles at this time of year may reflect these traditions.

The Winter Solstice is a time when the evil spirits are driven from the world. We have memories of such traditions in events as the "knocking nights" in Bavaria where children dress up in masks and go from house to house reciting rhymes starting with 'Knock' (*Klopf an* in German) and making noise with bells, stick and similar objects. All of this to drive away evil spirits and in reward for their efforts the children get candies or money by those living in the houses.

The Celts certainly celebrated the Winter Solstice as it marked the rebirth of the sun and marked 'the shortest day' (or 'the darkest midnight'); it was one of the four fire festivals marking the equinoxes and solstices. Winter Solstice was cause for celebration, since it meant the journey toward Spring would now begin. But as the Celts had no written tradition, we know little of the Celtic ceremonies or rituals tied to the Winter Solstice. However, at Newgrange in County Meath, Ireland, there is an ancient tomb covered with beautiful artwork, which remains in darkness for much of the year. But once a year, on the Winter Solstice, the tomb fills with light to reveal the beautiful artwork on the walls. Such a site certainly implies that the Irish Celts did consider this time particularly important.

Greenery, plants, evergreens, holly, oak and others are all used to symbolize the return of the Sun and the approach of Spring. Thoughts and theories about which plant symbolizes what and originates from what tradition abound. In any case, they are symbols of new life and warmer days ahead.

For the Romans, the major winter festival was Saturnalia, beginning on the 17th of December. Saturn was the titan overthrown by Jupiter (Zeus) who then became king of the gods. Saturnalia marked the end of saving resources for winter and was a time of feasting and celebrating. The festival began with a formal sacrifice at the temple of Saturn, guardian of the public treasury. Followed by a festive banquet in front of the temple. People dressed informally, wearing *pilei* (soft caps), where there was unrestrained feasting amongst shouts of "Io Saturnalia!" Saturnalia lasted until the 23rd of December with the days spent in relaxation and feasting, courts and schools were closed, punishments were postponed and life was good.

Saturnalia was also a time to celebrate Saturn, the 'lord of misrule.' Slaves were served by their masters and children ran households. It was a time for celebration with friends, public parties and revelry. On the last day of Saturnalia gifts were given. The gifts were items such as: *Strenae*--fruits that were supposed to confer good luck for the coming year. Later fruits gave way to cakes and other tokens that served the same purpose. *Sigillaria*, small pottery dolls, were presented in sacrifice for atonement to Saturn and in memory of the ancestors. *Cerei*, candles to symbolize the light driving away the darkness, were another popular gift.

A common theme of winter celebrations are special foods made for the occasion, from American turkey to the British Christmas goose (as celebrated in Dickens *A Christmas Carol*) to special breads and sweets made just for the celebrations. It was also a time for drink, from brandy and ale to spiced elderberry wine, possets (a drink made of hot milk curdled with ale or wine and flavored with spices), wassail (spiced ale or wine) and spiked eggnog, alcohol has always been important to warm celebrants on those chill winter nights.

Part II- Breaking It Apart and Putting It Back Together

Adding such universal festivals as Winter Solstice may help to enrich the background of a game world, adding depth and texture to the world.

Festivals are always a good time to meet people and get together with old friends. But beyond the role-playing possibilities:

A 'knocking night' group of children might encounter an evil spirit who is not afraid of their noises and songs, a rescue would be in order.

A wealthy merchant seeks to impress the King with lavish gifts and hires the characters to fetch unique foods and gifts for the Winter celebration.

Perhaps the legends of the gods fighting back the darkness are not legends but the truth, and this year the gods need the characters help to defeat the darkness. This could be as minor as protecting a shrine from desecration or as epic as fighting beside the gods, as suits the campaign.

A short vision this time. I hope that all of you fine readers had a wonderful Winter Holiday season, whatever your faith and traditions.

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Steel's 2004 Gamer New Year's Resolutions

by Bradford Ferguson

With New Year's Day coming and people across the world making New Year's resolutions, I began thinking about whether I should make any resolutions this year. Undoubtedly, I make a resolution every other year to transform my body into that of an idealized roman statue. For 2004, I will make resolutions that I can keep.

My Player Resolutions:

Resolution #1: *I resolve to write a one-page background for Gregor that explains his humility and suspicions.*

"Hi, I'm Gregor, the white, anglo-saxon cleric of Torm!" I have to admit that I have recently been playing a character that has virtual no background written for him. My character does have a personality; he's humble and suspicious of characters that hold different beliefs than he does.

Resolution #2: *I resolve to only advise the DM only when it is urgent or when I know that he is open to outside input.*

As a former DM and an occasionally anal-retentive person, it can be hard for me to simply let go and not say anything when someone else is the storyteller or Dungeon Master. It is difficult to hold your tongue when you think the DM is making a seemingly obvious error with the rules or with the management of the campaign. My advice here is to know your DM; some DMs are prideful and stubborn and resent any input, while other DMs are more even-keeled and can put their emotions aside for the betterment of the game.

Just like you cannot change a person, you cannot change a Dungeon Master.

The DM's style will remain the same regardless of your objections. DMs will, over time, learn new tricks if they go online or read *Dragon Magazine* to better their DMing skills. Though they may learn more tricks, their style will not change. I once had a DM that was bent on exploiting the rules to make fights extra hard for the PCs and then he would chide the players after the fight if they struggled. It was not fun for me to be a player when he DM'd, so I left his game.

I have played with a couple of very experienced DMs who occasionally look to me for rules and other advice - though I'm not even that good with the rules. They have been DMing for a while, so they are good about sending out signals when they want input.

Resolution #3: *I resolved then and resolve again to not tell another player how to play their character except for when they ask me.*

Following GenCon 2003, I DM'd an *Arcana Unearthed* game through the

Siege on Ebonring Keep mini-campaign (Mystic Eye Games). After that, someone else in the group started up a *Forgotten Realms* campaign where I played the aforementioned cleric. At the first session, a new player figuratively screamed at me to heal his character (he did this both in-character and out-of-character). This infuriated me because I am an experienced player and I know how to play a cleric. I want to have fun when I play and not be told what to do.

My Dungeon Master Resolutions

Resolution #4: *I resolve to practice my NPCs in front of the mirror at home or in the car on the way to the game.*

Now that I am playing again, I have had the chance to see another DM in action. My current DM is great with thinking on his feet and is good with playing non-player characters (NPCs). I remember a *Warhammer Fantasy* game that I played in where there were two DMs (a married couple) and they were great with role-playing NPCs. They would usually give me a ride from my place to the game, but sometimes they would have me take a train out to a location near the game that they would pick me up from.

Of the times that they would have me take the train, it was because they would talk to each other about the game and practice the voices and mannerisms of the various NPCs that we were likely to encounter. I usually make notes about the mannerisms and voice of a NPC, but I usually do not practice those before the game. Invariably, I get too shy at the game, or I think that my players will think that my portrayal stinks.

Resolution #5: *I resolve to improvise more when my players do something unexpected.*

Every time my players do something that I am not prepared for, I silently freak out and rifle through my notes - frantically searching for a note or tidbit to help me through this little bump. Umm... Err... Uhh... I realize that this is not very fun for my players. I want to run the best game possible and have everything make perfect sense, but in these instances I need to simply think on my feet and wing it. My fear was that my players would not like my improvisations.

Sometimes I get this little bee in my ear that buzzes and says, "Don't let the playerzzz get their way... Buzzzz!" I run an *Arcana Unearthed* game where, through the standard *AU* rules, it is much easier for players to take prisoners than in standard *D&D*. Personally, I do not like prisoners to talk and to give up secrets. I guess that this goes back to my own personal desire not to talk if I were ever taken prisoner... *Anyways*, in reality, people talk. Even if you do not want to do something because it is realistic, in that case it is more fun for the players if their prisoner talks. Besides, you should award the players for taking prisoners and not simply killing every enemy in sight.

Resolution #6: *I resolve to let my players have their way more in certain parts of the story in order to speed the game along.*

More generally, while it is always good to give your players a challenge at every turn, sometimes it is better to let them have their way now and give them more challenges in the future. Maybe you can have the prisoner give some information, but refuse to give more until he or she is taken to another location that happens to be an ambush. "Yes, now my plans are coming to fruition." says the evil DM.

There! I've done it! I've finally made some New Year's resolutions that I can keep! Next year, I will have to resolve to metamorphosize myself into the image of a Greek god.

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What's missing in the Modern CRPG?

By Carl Batchelor

I'll admit that I spend too much time complaining about modern CRPG designers and not enough time pointing out what they could be (or should be) doing to improve the genre. Even though I cannot change the way Bioware handles combat in its CRPGs or the nasty habit some people have of slapping the "RPG" label on action-oriented games like Diablo, I can give some suggestions on what should be done differently in order to move the genre out of the rut it's in.

Although the past two years have been considered a new renaissance for CRPGs, I didn't consider it to be so. Neverwinter Nights was nothing more than a flashier version of Diablo with d20 rules, and the much celebrated depth of Morrowind was actually about as "deep" as a kiddie pool. Other disastrous titles like the abysmally boring Dungeon Siege and the confused RPG & RTS hybrid Freedom Force ended up serving me better as drink coasters than games. The PC has become so full of sub-standard CRPGs that if it wasn't for Gothic and Wizardry 8, I probably would have given up PC RPGs altogether and stuck with my Playstation. Thankfully, it isn't too late to reverse this downward spiral.

Perhaps the easiest and most beneficial change would be for the industry's game designers to pick a style of combat and stick with it. One of the main reasons behind my strong dislike of the Infinity Engine games was the fact that both the turn based and real-time modes of the game were flawed. Real time was nothing more than a frantic click-fest, and the pseudo turned based mode was hampered by the fact that each character's rounds weren't synchronized with the rest of the group. This is caused by the designer's lack of focus. Rather than pick one style and build the game around said combat style, they instead create a system that relies on constant tweaking and modifying by the user. What you end up with is a game that annoys the Turn-based gamers and even alienates some Real-time fans. One look at Troika's Arcanum will prove that to be true. Arcanum was an otherwise excellent game that was held back only by its confused combat system. The only game to have gotten this right is, oddly enough, Troika's infamous Greyhawk CRPG. Not only did it stick with a traditional turn-based combat system all throughout the game, but it recreated the strategy and immense difficulty that had been missing in most modern CRPGs.

Speaking of difficulty, another change that needs to be made is the one concerning the loss of challenge in CRPGs. While Troika's Temple of Elemental Evil was a fabulously difficult game, it is a rarity to find a CRPG

that cannot be beaten with minimal effort. Whether it was Neverwinter Night's Official Campaign and its exploitable re-spawning mechanism, Dungeon Siege's "Hand's Free" AI controlled combat, or Morrowind's archaic whack-a-mole simulation, it is obvious to the more experienced gamers among us that games are getting much easier. What happened to the difficulty that PC RPGs have always been known for? How can an adventure be enjoyable to the player if they can cruise through a majority of the game's battles using the same tactic time and time again? Even though Baldur's Gate 2 has received enough awards to fill an Olympic sized swimming pool, you have to admit that casting Haste before each fight and charging in with constant Whirlwind attacks while your mages threw magic missiles and fireballs would win you 90% of the game's battles. Although I understand that our CRPGs have been made easier in an effort to get more "Casual" gamers into the hobby, I don't like the effect it has had on my favorite games.

Of course, the worst thing to happen to the genre during the past five years has been the death of the single player campaign. With the success of Ultima Online, Everquest, Diablo, and now Neverwinter Nights, publishers have begun to shy away from completely "offline" games. Even when a game does possess a single player campaign, there is always a multiplayer mode available to gamers willing to sacrifice their free time to kill strangers online. While there is nothing wrong with the practice of including a multiplayer function in a game, it often has the unintentional effect of dumbing down the single player campaign. Much like the habit of doing both turn based and real time combat in a game, including both single and multiplayer often hurts the "offline" campaign. What happened to the epic storytelling and the non-linear questing we all remember? Will it soon be necessary for me to go online just to play the latest D&D CRPGs? Hopefully the single player epic won't die the way Turn-based tactical RPGs did in the 90's.

As always, my opinion is one that belongs to a small but notoriously cranky minority. With that being said, I don't expect my comments to be taken seriously or for them to have any bearing on next year's crop of CRPGs. What I do expect to happen is that other gamers who think like me will support companies who create games that not only challenge us, but also do not cost us 15 dollars a month or frustrate us with frenetic combat and overused clichés. CRPGs like Temple of Elemental Evil, Divine Divinity, and Arx Fatalis are hard to come by, and without our support and praise we will continue to see less and less of them in the coming years.

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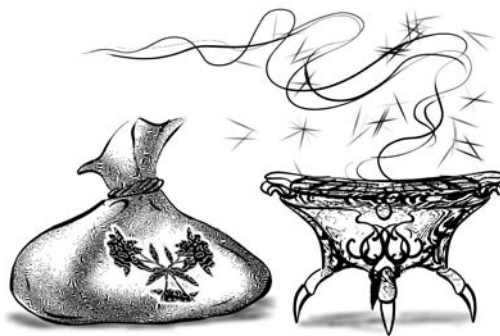
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Faith Based Initiative:

BAFOON: Bothered About Fundamentalists Offering Opinionated Nonsense

By Eytan Bernstein



"*Dungeons and Dragons* is a tragic and tangled subject. It is essentially a feeding program for occultism and witchcraft." This is the opening statement of an article by William Schnoebelen on the website of the infamous Jack T. Chick – crusader against *Dungeons and Dragons*. You can find his site at <http://www.darkholmekeep.net/crusade/dd2.cfm>. Chick is well known for his *Dark Dungeons* cartoons depicting how *Dungeons and Dragons* is a worldwide cult in which young people are drawn into a web of satanic and occult practices. Both Chick and Schnoebelen are part of a still extant movement against all forms of roleplaying games. In this month's Faith Based Initiative, I will be examining the myriad of anti-roleplaying material in an attempt to see into the psychology of its proponents. I will delve into the belief that the occult truly does exist and *D&D* players are at the forefront of its propagation. The goal here is to give an accurate history of the basic trends and members of the anti-role-playing movement. I will consider why these groups have sprung up: What are they worried about? Are there concerns in any way legitimate? Do their actions have any implications for the gaming community? First I will look at the various presumptions held by the opponents. Then, I will discuss the various factions that make up the movement. In the end, I will try to make sense of it all.

The first presumption of most Christian fundamentalist opponents is that the occult is real and that *D&D* players are at the center of its practice. They claim to have seen *D&D* players in covens that practices actual spells. Many claim to have been former *D&D* players that saw the light of Jesus. Schnoebelen was a practicing Christian who lost faith and turned to the occult arts. He claims that he and his wife became accomplished occultists with significant powers of ESP and "white witchcraft." His wife was a high priestess and he was an avid participant. They claim to have been witness to a cult of almost 200 people in Wisconsin near the headquarters of the former *TSR* in Lake Geneva. When making points about *D&D*, Schnoebelen constantly refers to how his experiences as a satanic priest were extremely similar to those printed in the *D&D* manual. This brings us to our second presumption.

The second presumption is that when playing *D&D*, gamers are actually participating in occult activities and that there is some sort of overarching organization like the masons that governs *D&D* cultists. When combined with the first presumption, we have gamers playing *D&D* that actually have magical powers. If only that were true, but alas it is not. These critics cannot seem accept the fact that roleplaying games are not about the worship of Satan or the practice of witchcraft. Most gamers grow up in normal houses and very few are Wiccan or in any way pagan – not that there is anything wrong with this. While organizations such as the RPGA do exist and people do participate in gaming conventions such as *ICON* and *GenCon* – as far as I am aware – there is no overarching body that dictates or controls roleplaying in any way. Gamers are not told what to do, feel or believe, and often can't even agree upon what to eat at the game; imagine, trying to get these people into an organized coven. Opponents feel that participants in *D&D* may be invoking magic and spirits simply by participating because they feel that the game is based on real occult paraphernalia. If playing *D&D* actually invoked magical power, why haven't I won the lottery? Why can't I put curses on those who I dislike? Mr. Schnoebelen, if magic really does exist and *D&D* can grant us the power to use it, please let the readers at *Silven* know how. I am sure a lot of us would have great use for a few trinkets or charms. I have tried to get my groups to attempt more involved roleplaying – making up little incantations and the like. Most gamers sit around rolling dice and eating lots of chips. Very few kneel in chain mail bikinis in acts of rapt supplication to Chthonic deities. If magic is real, I have certainly been playing in the wrong groups. Even if gamers are not involved in witchcraft, many argue that the games are a violent influence on impressionable youth. This is our third presumption.

The third presumption is that roleplaying games, like video games and violent movies, increase the likelihood that an individual or group will commit violent acts. Schnoebelen lists 11 acts of murder or suicide committed by *D&D* players in the late 1970s and throughout the 1980s. He claims that in each case, the act is directly linked to the participation in *D&D*. This is a common debate on psychologists, educators and politicians. Some feel that the constant violent stimuli of movies and games desensitize youth to the harsh realities of death and suffering. Others feel that only unstable people are affected in this way and that if it wasn't a game or movie, it would be something else. While I obviously side with the latter position, the first argument is not without some merit. Parents do have reason to worry about what their children are seeing and doing – especially in a world where information is so readily available. While I feel that parents cannot prevent their children from experiencing reality, many are worried about the corruptive influence of pornography and violent games or movies. What most parents don't realize is that gamers are no more likely to commit crimes and acts of violence than anyone else. In fact, studies indicate the following things about roleplayers: According to Michael Stackpole – an awesome RPG writer/novelist who has studied this phenomenon – they are significantly less likely to kill themselves than the rest of the population. Criminologists Suzanne

Abyeta & James Forest found that gamers were less likely to commit crimes than others. The Association of Gifted-Creative Children of California and The American Association of Suicidology have found no link between suicide and RPGs. All the cases being brought about by Schnoebelen and BADD – Bothered by Dungeons and Dragons, the most prominent anti-roleplaying group – have been refuted by numerous sources. This flies in the face of our fourth presumption.

The fourth presumption is that *D&D* brainwashes adolescents into a life of moral decrepitude and sends them into a spiraling path of evil. (if you think I'm kidding, read *Dark Dungeons*.) This concept is linked to the second presumption that *D&D* is the vehicle of an insipid organization whose goal is to spread the tenets of Satanism. I have heard from friends growing up in western Pennsylvania and the mid-west that they went to large organized events condemning *D&D* and rock and roll. That to me seems like brainwashing. Advocates of this presumption feel that older people – often teachers or neighbors lure young people into playing *D&D*. They depict *D&D* as having stages. The levels in the game correspond to levels in the hierarchy of the *D&D* coven as well as the level of magical power achieved by its members. Success in the game is directly linked to success in the coven. If a character dies, the player is supposedly exiled – hence the accusation that such abandonment leads to youth suicide. This particular idea is especially common to Jack T. Chick's *Dark Dungeons*, the first of the anti-roleplaying examples.

Dark Dungeons is a surprisingly entertaining comic strip. It follows the exploits of Debbie, an innocent young girl who plays *D&D*. She is about the be raised to the 8th level, the level where you learn the "real power." Her friend Marci's character – the indelible Blackleaf - dies and in desperate loneliness, Marci kills herself. The wicked looking female DM has no sympathy for Debbie or Marci. Debbie goes on to seek the counsel of a strange man in a park and then is saved by a priest? in a rather cultish looking pulpit who exercises the evil spirits out of her. She thanks god for setting her free as she is staring at a bonfire – presumably a book burning of *D&D* material. (another frightening tendency of these critics is the desire to burn books). Also unusual is the fact that all three of the main characters in the comic strip are female. While there are female gamers – and they are some of the best roleplayers – they are far less common than this strip suggests. In addition, the villain is a seductive DM reminiscent of a succubus. The supposedly good characters have a much more wholesome appearance. Not only is Chick's comic strip inaccurate of gaming, but it is also incredibly sexist. *Mystery Science Theater 3000* did a hilarious spoof of this strip. It is definitely a must see.

Another common source of grief from opponents of *D&D* is the disappearance of Dallas Egbert III from the steam tunnels under the University of Michigan. Numerous accounts exist of what happened to him. Sources suggest that he was a supra-genius, gay, socially inept, an epileptic and mentally ill. Others suggest that he was simply a troubled student. If any of this is true, it seems unlikely that *D&D* was the cause of his disappearance, but somehow critics have hounded this. They feel it corresponds with their belief that *D&D* players are corrupt, dangerous and unstable. In all likelihood, the incredible homophobia on campus combined with

mental instability lead to his disappearance – not *D&D*. The fact that he serially murdered animals and had a history of violent outbursts should give the impression that he was already missing marbles before *D&D*. The game did not make him the way he was. Many gamers have gone to the tunnels out of curiosity. I know a few that have even played there – though I imagine that to be a difficult task considering the steam. Egbert actually reappeared a month later in Louisiana as an oil field roughneck – an unusual situation considering that he was only 16 (lending some backing to the idea that he was a supra-genius) and looked not much older than 12. The media never seemed to take note of this though and it is still used as a criticism of RPGs.

D&D critics have made forays into film as well. The most well known film made about *D&D* is the atrocious *Rona Jaffe's Mazes and Monsters*. It is a TV movie based on Jaffe's book about how *D&D* leads to mental deterioration. It was one of Tom Hanks' first roles and was not a particularly auspicious start to a very successful career. He plays a college student that gets embroiled in a *D&D* game in which the group sets up a live action dungeon in some dangerous caves. Hanks' character runs off to New York City where he lives out his life as a character until he is apprehended. He never recovers and remains mentally ill. The film depicts the game as having levels that one achieves as a player, not a character. This is an example (among many) of critics really not being well versed in what they are criticizing. We can say this from the perspective of *D&D* players, but fanatics rarely listen to arguments of logic. It also lends credence to the idea that *D&D* is some sort of overarching organization that attempts to brainwash youth into being their characters (as well as becoming high priestesses of the cult of Diana in the case of *Dark Dungeons*) Fortunately, the film is rather mediocre.

The quintessential critics of *D&D* are BADD – a rather imposing sounding acronym for *Bothered By Dungeons and Dragons*. The group was founded by Pat Pulling who blamed the game for the suicide of her son. She also claims that she received an ESP message before his death and that her son's teacher (apparently involved in the game as well) put a curse on him. She thus started BADD, filing a suit against her school district – dropped as frivolous – and petitioned the Federal Trade Commission to put warnings on RPGs, advertising their potential dangers. The commission chose not to go through with the warnings, citing insufficient cause for concern. Pulling used BADD as a vehicle to give lectures condemning roleplaying. Her antics were often backed up by the ubiquitous psychiatrist Dr. Thomas Radecki – the head and only member of NCTV the National Coalition on Television Violence. NCTV and BADD joined together in 1985 to file the petition. Somehow, Pulling and Radecki became experts on *D&D* and were consistently cited as such in news reports. Radecki was even called in to give expert testimony in the trials of murder defendants who had played *D&D*. Contrary to Pulling's expertise is her fervent belief in ESP as well as her clear lack of any substantial knowledge of *D&D* – you only need read her writings to see this. Radecki should have easily been discredited considering that his findings went against everything that hundreds of more reputable sources have found. Despite all of this, their efforts seemed to have paid off. They caused a panic among parents in the Bible belt and perpetrated many anti-*D&D* events as

mentioned in the fourth presumption. They convinced parents that *D&D* players cast hexes on parents and teachers and actually engaged in Satanic rites and true witchcraft. Book-burnings occurred throughout the belt along with the rallies and anti-*D&D* events.

So, what did all of the efforts amount to in the end? Well, they may have stopped a few people that were unsure of their interest in the game, but they certainly didn't stop many hard-core gamers. They got a lot of parents worked up and increased the level of censorship considerably in many areas of the game. It was not entirely without cause that parents were worried. If I were Pat Pulling, I would be wondering what happened to make my son kill himself. She, of course, did the most unhealthy thing she could have done and blamed it first on the school and then on a game in which her son was loosely involved. Her grief is understandable, but rather than looking inward or attempting closure, she started a crusade. Jack T. Chick has no excuse for his writings and really seems to live in some bizarre fantasy-land where magic exists and playing *D&D* allows us to tap into the mysteries of evil. The same goes for William Schnoebelen and his cult of white magic. How these people continue to write this nonsense without admitting to themselves that they are lying to everyone is beyond me. They are engaged in acts of ultimate hypocrisy. They are condemning people who pretend in the name of entertainment and mild diversion while they are claiming that witchcraft, sympathetic spells, ESP magical satanic cults truly exist. Since these things obviously do not exist, someone is lying. Either all of the *D&D* players in the world are keeping some giant secret (and apparently I am not high enough "level" to be privy to it) or the opponents are living in a fantasy world where *D&D* is a cult and Christianity is the savior of mankind.

Fortunately, the actions of these opponents have few implications for today's gamer. Their fervor has died down (though apparently it's still going strong in a few places in the Bible belt). While the occasional TV movie pops up (though not since 1992) and *Mazes and Monsters* makes an appearance once in a while, the media has mostly ignored RPGs. They are now lumped into the same category as video games, though they are often seen as somewhat better because they involve reading. A recent case surfaced where a man who killed his wife also happened to be a *D&D* player. It got a little coverage and the issue resurfaced, but it was generally dismissed. The fervor in which the game was attacked in the past has died down. This is especially good amidst the massive success of 3.0/3.5. *D&D* is the most popular its ever been. More people are playing it than ever before and it is at a higher level of quality. Hopefully, we will be able to look back on these opponents with mild amusement rather than disdain and in some cases worry. When 4.0 comes out (hopefully not too soon) these attacks should be all but gone. I hope that the concerns of the parents have lessened, but these sorts of worries will always exist. Some parents will always be overprotective and this is their right to a certain extent. We hope that they will cease their efforts to increase censorship. That is something I'd certainly be willing to fight.

In next month's Faith Based Initiative, I will be discussing how people construct gods and pantheons for their game settings. In this, I will go into what it takes to make a balanced and interesting pantheon. I will discuss the relevant theology behind the creation of realistic gods that follow the patterns of literature as well as out-there deities of our own make and model. The article will also go into what is necessary to make the pantheon fit the world for which it is made. This article is being done in the hope that it will help people who are attempting to create unique and interesting pantheons for their homebrew worlds. Too often, people just use the *Greyhawk* gods because they can't be bothered with creating new ones. My question to them is, why go to the trouble of creating everything else, but not work on something so vital? This article should help people who didn't think they could do this or didn't want to put in the time.

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Around the Butcher's Block: Winter foods in Gaming

By Chris Harris

A few months before the *Trumpeter* became what it is today, I was going to start a small article series on cuisine in gaming. After twenty years in the hospitality and restaurant industry, I thought it would be nice to bring some of this knowledge to assist gamers in creating a better sense of foods and how this history can relate to gaming. We all have taverns, inns, hotels, or some sort of "house of hospitality" in our games. Some of us play in a pure fantasy world and some head toward a more realistic version of a campaign. I hope to bring some light to the edible aspects of your campaign or world. I am starting this series with the one time of the year where foods become more a comfort and a necessity. This article includes both some general suggestions to work food into your campaigns as well as specific discussion of prevalent winter foods.

Types of Foods Found in the Winter Months:

Winter is the time for feasting. It is the time of year when work would be slowed or stopped. People would eat richer, heartier foods to help "thicken their chops" for the long cold times. The end of the year food-wise, winter is the toughest season of all. Most would work the three other seasons to prepare for the long hard winters ahead. Some edibles from the summer and early fall are preserved, canned, dried, smoked, and stored in cellars deep within the earth. Depending on location, these cellars can actually become freezers if not placed deep enough in the ground. Some regions during winter actual still have a growth season in warmer, milder climates of the continents that are closer to the equator.

Most winter vegetables are hearty foods, high in starches and fiber. Great examples of these are beets, broccoli, brussel sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, celery, potatoes, spinach, sweet potatoes, and winter squashes. Depending on the region you are campaigning in, these may or may not be widely available and possibly only found in farmer's markets. Most of these vegetables are cultivated in moderate to cold climates, however.

You can find quite a bit of spring or summer vegetables preserved in some form or fashion in the winter. These can range from jarred or canned green beans, tomatoes, and cucumber/pickles to sun dried tomatoes (For those who do not know, tomatoes are technically a fruit but are counted as a vegetable as well). For more information about vegetables you can checkout this website, <http://www.harvestfields.netfirms.com/food/06bkc/19.htm>. They also offer preparation ideas and suggestions.

Surprisingly, you can find fruits in these hard months in the warmer moderate and temperate climates. The fruits that can be found are apples, avocado, dates, grapefruit, lemons navel oranges, and winter pears. Again, you can find spring and summer fruits preserved as jams, jellies, or dried. Dried fruits are great not just for road travel but make excellent additions to any meal.

When it comes to meats during the winter months, all are readily available including most fish and seafood. Meats are region-dependent, and should be a consideration when planning your campaign menu. One would not have trouble finding cod, salmon, or other cold-water fishes in costal or river areas.

Campaign Cuisine Considerations:

If you are running campaigns based on specific time periods here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Canning foods (this includes Mason Jars) did not come around till the early 1900's.
- Most medieval people lived on a diet of meat, fish, and grains. Vegetables were not a staple in a commoner or serf diet.
- Water was not consumed as much as is today. Many towns and cities that were located rivers had a lack of clean water. This is because people would use that water to wash clothes, go to the bathroom, or even bury the dead. The water would be tainted and many would drink brews or distilled liquids because of the process used to make these included boiling, steaming, or long cooking times.
- Only the rich during the renaissance era could afford the fields to grow and eat vegetables. The serfs did get some of the product they produced and normally bartered within the serfdom for other items such as bread and meats.

d20 Fantasy Food Ideas:

For d20 fantasy play, winter foods can even have different inherent benefits. The food can be made to give warmth and energy for the long cold periods. The high starches and meats are classic fuel sources. You can use food sources like stews, breads, and preserved foods to give temporary modifiers to PCs or NPCs. A chef making these foods would require some form of formal training, Profession: Cook or Chef (8 or more ranks), and some talent in spellcasting (3rd level or higher).

Here are a few more ideas for the use of foods in your d20 campaign:

- The metamagic feat *Brew Potion* can work wonderfully when creating magical food and drink. Most recipes call for some of the same ideals as brewing a potion.
- The recipe might come from a scroll that infuses the magic to the food prepared.
- Limit any magic used when crafting magical foods to that which gives temporary increases to ability scores, save throws, and the feat *Endurance*.
- Use food as a way to send healing into the campaign. Clergy where one of the first chefs though and the food from a temple, church or monastery could give healing or help to the wayward traveler.

Next season, I hope to bring some insight to spring. It's the season of rebirth and the time for planting. Spring foods bring some much-needed life to the bland heavy foods of the winter.

Till next Season:

'Like the goodness of the five loaves and two fishes,

Which God divided among the five thousand men,

May the blessing of the king, who so divided, be upon our share of this common meal.'

-- A Toast from Ireland

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Polyglot : Linguistic Realism vs. Simplicity in RPG Gaming

A monthly column by Dana Driscoll

Welcome to Polyglot, your source for RPG linguistic insight. This month, we delve into the depths of realism vs. simplicity in RPGs, with a specific focus on the ramifications this struggle has on how languages and language learning are handled within an RPG setting. Not only will we survey the way that languages are presented in several gaming systems, but also how this handling plays into the larger issue of simplicity vs. realism.

Perhaps simplicity vs. realism is the greatest conundrum known to the RPG game designer. While we are talking about fictional characters and fictional worlds, gamers still quantify most of what is present in a game mechanics-wise in terms of real life. How things work in reality is more often than not the basis for how things work in a gaming system. Note that I say "basis." Obviously, things like magic systems, new races, super-human powers, and extra-dimensional travel are not reality based; but combat, weapons in fantasy games, skills, gravity, etc. are usually based on reality.

While it is true that game designers may have one thing or another in mind when designing an RPG gaming system, the stance of this article is not that of questioning the motivations or intentions of designers, but rather the larger issue—the concept of realism vs. simplicity. The question can be applied to a large number of topics in RPG gaming, but the focus of this article—and indeed this column is language.

Language is quite complicated. Anyone who has attempted to master a language other than his or her native tongue(s) knows that it takes years of sustained effort. Accents and dialect differences are only further evidence of how complex any—and every—language is. With that, accurately capturing linguistic realism fully in an RPG game is impossible. Making a half-hearted attempt at realism, however, is an entirely different matter.

Let's first take a look at how the d20 system handles language. At level one, a character chooses bonus languages based on an intelligence modifier plus the common tongue and a racial tongue (if playing a non-human race). Additional languages can be gained by purchasing ranks in the Speak Language skill. While this skill must be trained, the *Players Handbook* gives no indication as to the length of time one needs to train. From the *PHB* 3.5e, "You purchase Speak Language ranks just like any other skill, but instead of buying a rank in it, you choose a new language you can speak. You don't make Speak Language checks. You either know a language or you don't."

Now, a quick delve into reality. First, language acquisition comes in two forms—primary language acquisition and second-language learning. Pre-adolescent children are the only individuals who can acquire languages as native speakers—i.e. as primary language speakers. If a child has substantial exposure to two or more languages, the child will be bilingual—they will have two or more languages as native speakers. Children acquire languages effortlessly—they simply need exposure and interaction. After a child reaches puberty, however, the brain is no longer receptive to language, and any language learning after this period is a tedious process (as anyone who has attempted to learn an additional language has discovered, I'm sure).

Language acquisition does fit, to some extent, into how d20 languages are determined at level one. This is only under the assumption that all humans speak common and that the character has grown up with native speakers of his or her own racial language. Determining bonus languages based on intelligence is questionable, but probably the best way the d20 system has to handle it. These bonus languages should be learned languages—meaning that the speaker of them is not native and produces some form of accent. The whole d20 system can easily get thrown out of whack when a character decides to get creative with his or her back story and ends up separated as a child from the rest of the race.

Where the system really fails is in the utilization of the Speak Language skill after level one. Purchasing a single rank in Speak Language (or two for cross-class) and magically "knowing" the language is completely unrealistic. There are levels of language proficiency, accents, and dialects—none of which are even mentioned in the core material. Either the designers simply did not want to deal with the concept of language, or they never bothered to do their research and find out how it works. This lack of consideration or research of linguistic principles seems to pervade other Wizards products as well.

Lets move to the recent release of the *Draconomicon* for the d20 system; specifically, looking at their pitiful treatment of the Draconic tongue. Apparently the Draconic language is exactly like English in word order and pronunciation of almost all sounds. No systematic way of describing the lexicon is present, the words given as examples do not use a standardized writing/notation system, and the way that syllables are broken up and pronounced violates a universal linguistic phonetic principle called sonority sequencing. Finally, the most glaring issue is the sub-heading in the section—Pidgin Draconic—with a list of "sample" Draconic sentences.

Pidgin Draconic? Its apparent that the designers have no clue what a pidgin is, but that the word was somehow related to language and sounded good. This small bit of writing (about two pages) does not even fit into today's discussion—it is obvious that reality vs. simplicity was not even considered in this case. The designers did not consult any linguistic reality but their own. Shoddy research and ignorance should have no place in Wizards publications, or any professional publication, for that matter.

There is one Wizards publication I found when researching this article that does a decent job with handling language. The *Forgotten Realms* campaign setting (specifically the *Races of Faerun* and the *Campaign Setting* book) have a surprisingly through analysis of the racial and regional languages, dialect regions, and a through description of why the common tongue exists.

Moving on to third party publications, let's next take a look at the *Everquest* RPG gaming system, published by *Sword and Sorcery*. *Everquest* (EQ) is a d20 variant system which, of the language systems I have surveyed, is by far the most realistic. In EQ, language is a trained-only skill, and a skill based on a 1-5+ ranking system. One rank in a language means that an individual can understand and speak a few simple words. Two ranks means that an individual can both comprehend and construct basic sentences. Three ranks allows one to communicate simple concepts. Four ranks means that a character is as fluent as a native speaker, although they will still speak with an accent. Five or more ranks means that the person begins to understand word histories (etymologies) and a bit of linguistics and can somewhat mask an accent. The communication system itself requires skill checks for characters with 3 or fewer ranks when utilizing Speak Language. There are several set DCs to convey complex ideas depending on how many ranks in the language that the speakers have between them. Many of the other skills in this system are language dependent as well. This system would be relatively easy to implement in other gaming systems.

Compared to the standard d20 system, the EQ system seems to have maintained a nice balance between realism and simplicity. While EQ's system is not overly complex, it accurately takes into account the different stages of language learning, non-native speakers with accents, and other communication complexities. The EQ system is not only much more linguistically sound, but actually treats the Speak Language skill like any other skill, being much more consistent with the established mechanics than the core rules themselves. EQ demonstrates that with some relatively minor research, effort, and mechanics tweaking, one can please even the gamers who happen to be linguists like myself.

Moving on to an example from a console RPG game, *Final Fantasy X* (FFX) has an interesting mini-quest—mastery of the Al-Bhed language. The Al-Bhed are a group of isolated humans that speak their own language. Throughout the course of the game, you can find "Al Bhed Primers" and slowly "learn" the language. As you gather primers and consequently encounter more Al Bhed, you can slowly decipher—letter by letter—what the Al Bhed are saying. From a "reality" perspective, FFX has language learning totally off. People do not learn to recognize a language sound by sound, but rather on a word (and morphemic) level. While its true that someone learning to speak a new language will learn the sounds of the language early on, knowing the sounds alone will not allow an individual to decipher meaning in most of the world's languages. In this case, we have a simplicity way outranking reality. Would there be a better way to do it? Perhaps, although it may not give the same effect, and would be extremely complicated to employ.

Handling languages spoken, language acquisition, and language learning with RPG games is possible to accomplish in a meaningful yet simplistic fashion, maintaining a reasonable balance between simplicity and reality. And, as I have demonstrated, some gaming systems handle language very poorly, like the d20 system or FFX, and others, like EQ, handle language quite effectively.

The issue of reality vs. simplicity is one that seems to be a constant struggle when designing and playing RPG games. While some systems seem to either disregard reality and/or have a strong slant towards simplicity, the best systems are the ones who can maintain a balance between simple, effective mechanics and preservation of the basic facts of reality. And as the EQ system demonstrated, rather minor effort on the part of designers can be used to accomplish this balance.

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Antipodean Adventures



QUINKINS

G'Day all. This edition of *Antipodean Adventures* departs from the standard format used thus far. Rather than dealing with a historical event or person, I have instead chosen to focus on some mythological creatures from the Aboriginal Dreamtime. I first heard about such creatures when I was in second grade, where our teacher read us a story which featured the Quinkins. Fear was struck into the hearts of my whole class. When we walked home that day, we squinted at every gum tree suspiciously. Quinkins are an excellent example of the inventiveness and distinctive style of Australian native mythology.

Quinkins are spirit people of the Cape York region, in northern Queensland, who have taken on material form. Their images have been recorded in cave paintings by the Yalanji tribe alongside pictures of ancestral beings and sacred animals. There are two types of Quinkins: a tall, stick-thin race called the Timara and a shorter, fatter, evil human eating race called Imjim. They dwell in the same outback areas and fight a constant battle with each other, although this is generally characterized by guerilla raids and minor skirmishes rather than open warfare. They fight with spears, sticks, rocks and natural weapons such as bite and claw: a savage melee ensues when the Quinkins meet in combat. Other races can easily be caught in the middle of this never-ending battle, although Quinkins rarely allow themselves to be seen by anyone outside of their own species (except during the Imjim transformation ritual, discussed below).

Timara are ten to twelve feet tall, and as thin in body and limb as the spears they wield. Their heads are shaped like helmets, and their eyes glow with an unearthly white light. As black as dark elves in skin tone, Timara are humorous, whimsical spirits who like to play tricks on humans, the Imjim and their thin Quinkin comrades. Imjim, on the other hand, are seven to eight feet tall with round bellies and long, knobbly tails which they can use to leap great distances like a kangaroo. Their ears are flat hexagons, which are almost as wide as their heads, and can pick up the laughter of innocent children from miles away. Their infravision-enabled eyes glow red with a malevolent glare, especially as they plan their nefarious schemes. Imjim have long, sharp claws which they are more than happy to use alongside their wicked fangs in any given melee situation. Imjim skin is more of a dark, muddy brown than the deep black of the Timara.

Imjim are dyed-in-the-wool carnivores. They will eat any meat available, but especially love the taste of large green frogs. Imjim have been known to leap from behind rocks and trees, frightening the living daylight out of hunters and stealing their kills. Of course, they are not adverse to eating the hunters as well, if the opportunity

presents itself. They cannot reproduce, and as such their only method of propagation involves turning human children into nasty, ugly creatures like themselves. Imjim have the ability to magically mimic any humanoid voice, which also acts as a *charm person* effect. They often lure children into their dark cave by imitating their parents. When the children enter the cave, the Quinkins leap onto them, breaking the spell at the same time they rend the poor victim's body to pieces. From the remains will rise a new Imjim, ready and eager to recruit more of its kind. Imjim will track and lure a potential victim over many miles, brushing over the victim's tracks as well its own so they cannot be found. They always perform the transformation ritual in their lair. It is considered a sacred event, to be shared with their brethren.

Timara keep a watchful eye on their evil counterparts, often disguising themselves as spindly trees or part of a fallen log. They are experts in the field of camouflage, and if they decide to hide they are nigh impossible to track down. Timara like nothing better than to thwart the schemes of their dark brethren, and have the power to automatically break the *charm* effect of the Imjim voice imitation. They are also partial to eating meat, but balance their diet with fruit and vegetables.

The impossibly thin Timara live in the cracks of rocks and other such natural crannies, where they can be hidden from the eyes of humanity. Imjim prefer the darkness of a cave, which they usually inhabit in groups of around seven to nine. Timara rarely speak, even to each other. It is not known whether they use other forms of communication, or whether they are naturally laconic. Imjim tend to speak only when imitating the voice of a humanoid, although they are quite capable of regular speech.

Adventure Ideas

1. The son of the state governor has just gone missing from his bedchamber. The window is open. A passing maid swears she heard the governor's voice just before the boy disappeared.
2. The PCs are camping in the outback when one of them swears he or she saw a tree move! It is a Timara, investigating some Imjim activity in the region. The Timara may call upon the PCs to assist it in thwarting some nasty scheme afoot.

3. A local woodcutter has accidentally wounded a resting Timara, thinking it was a gum tree. The Quinkin population has become enraged at this apparent attack upon one of their own kind. Will the Imjim and Timara join forces against the local community? Can the PCs resolve this diplomatically?

Links to Previous Columns

Note: The Quinkins are alleged to live exclusively in northern Queensland, as has been stated. The following two adventures would take place in the southern states. I hope that I have offended anybody's geographical or mythological sensibilities by placing the creatures outside their traditional spiritual home.

Bushrangers: Ben Hall held everyone captive in Robinson's Hotel in Canowindra for a three day party. Was there anything more sinister behind his motives than wanting to show up the police and improve his popularity? A war between the Quinkins took place in Canowindra, and anyone who left the pub would become a pawn in their struggle. Somehow Hall knows, and will do his level best to keep everyone alive, without ever mentioning the monsters.

Eureka Stockade: It is just before midnight, December 2nd, 1854. The miners are in the stockade, feeling a bit nervous about the impending confrontation with the authorities. Suddenly, a warning blasts from a trumpet. It isn't the troopers, but rather a group of squat, leaping beasts with glowing red eyes, hungry for meat. Little wonder the stockade was all but empty when the government launched its surprise 3am attack!

Other Genres

Pulp: A hunt has been mounted, with an eccentric millionaire scientist offering a substantial cash reward for evidence of the existence of Quinkins in the Queensland outback. Extra money will be paid for the first group to bring in an actual, live specimen. Adventuring parties will have to deal with potentially hostile natives, the dangers and heat of the bush, as well as resistance from the Quinkins themselves.

Modern: A secret government department has captured a Timara, and they are currently attempting to unravel the secret of the Quinkin mimicry (they are unaware of the difference between Imjim and Timara). The PCs are urged by a local Yalanji elder to rescue the benevolent creature before it is tortured and killed – something which could have drastic consequences for relations between Timara and humans.

Science Fiction: Children are disappearing from the miners' camps of Cubisia-6, and a dark alien presence is beginning to be felt by those adults who are left. The slave miners and their reptilian overlords may have to band together to defeat this menace before they are all killed. The mimicry talent of the Imjim is causing trouble in the ranks, as miners are accused of insubordination and the reptiles are dressed down by their superiors for issuing random orders.

Horror: The Timara protect the Aboriginal people from the depredations of the Imjim, but perhaps they view other races as similarly evil invaders. A group of PCs may awaken through the night to find their outback campsite surrounded. They have unwittingly destroyed a sacred site, and the Quinkins are here to make them pay.

Other Sources

Percy Trezise, *Turramulli the Giant Quinkin*.

Percy Trezise and Dick Roughsey, *The Quinkins*.

I based my version of the Quinkins on Trezise's work. There are certain sites on the Internet that refer to the creatures as being Yeti-like, but that is nothing like the monsters who scared the hell out of me and my classmates back in 1987. He combines a storytelling method which reads like an Aboriginal folktale with artwork that crosses between native and European styles. Overall, I find his work very effective in creating an appropriate atmosphere, and if you want to use Quinkins in a campaign, these books would be a great help.

Information on the Cape York region can be found at <http://www.visitcapeyork.com> The section titled 'History' on the left sidebar is useful for determining local flavor, and the 'People' section makes mention of Quinkin art and an area of the region known as 'Quinkan (sic) Country'.

Concluding Statement

I weighed up whether to create and include d20 stats for the Quinkins, but in the end decided against it. I think that the creatures can cross a variety of genres. If there is an overwhelming outcry at this, and people want to see mechanics for them, I may be able to include some in the next edition of *Antipodean Adventures*. Let me know what you think in the comments section.

ANTIPODEAN ADVENTURES BONUS FEATURE: THE NAMES OF AUSTRALIA

I currently work as a Directory Assistance Operator here in Australia. It is a repetitive job, and one which becomes somewhat automatic after a while. Mind-numbing boredom can easily set in as one takes three calls a minute for a four hour stretch. The other day I started paying attention to the names of some towns, cities and areas of this broad, brown land, and decided to write some down. I focused exclusively on names which would be of use to someone creating a campaign world, and struggling for good, generic appellations for their own civilizations. As such, and in the order in which I heard and wrote them down, I give you....

Antipodean Adventures: The Names of Australia!

One last thing before we begin. Since I was hearing some of these areas mumbled down a phone line, I made an error or two in what the name was – turning a boring name into a gussied up fantasy town name! In others I altered the spelling to create a slightly more traditional name. I have marked these imposters with an asterisk.

Purple Gardens*	Forest Hill	Stones Corner	Daisy House	Ferny Grove	Springvale
Fairy Meadow	Rockdale	Gold Coast	Sunshine Coast	Haymarket	Forestfield*
Black Creek*	Fortitude Valley	Princetown		Southport	Brookside
Bayswater	Newcastle	Queensland		Blacktown	Shellharbour
Shoalhaven	Sunnybank Hills	Sunshine		Box Hill	Kingsgrove
Maidstone	Broadmeadows	Moon Ponds*		Castle Hill	Midland
Crows Nest	Grovedale	Wintergardens		Southern Cross	
Mount Pleasant	Newtown	Middle Swan		Northern Territory	
Redcliff*	Rainbow	Gladesville		Merrylands	Oak Flats
Merry Beach	Shell Cove	Rosebud		Ramsgate	Blue Mountains
Ferntree Gully	Southerland*	Gladstone		Redfern	Brown Plains*
Mornington	Clayfield	Highgate Hill		Doveton	Hunter
The Rocks	Northbridge	Ringwood		Fairlight	Underwood
Orange	Kings Cross	Black Rock		Applecross	Riverton
Garden City					

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Star's Night Part 5

By Aaron Todd

Synopsis: Ynara Diri had learned a great deal about the planet that her son was supposedly being kept on, and none of it was good. The planet was a virtual wasteland with little hope of escape. This information in hand, though, she would return to her ship, get supplies, and head out to find her son.

Jagger Tan had been minding his own business at the bar when this woman came in and sat down after a couple hands of Cinq-Zer. She didn't seem very happy. She must have lost. But then again, most people do. The Bollen were tough to beat.

She sat down a seat away from him. He normally wouldn't have noticed, but he'd lost five straight on the H'rafa, so he needed something of a distraction. The bar itself was a highly uninteresting place when you spent enough time in it.

To a foreigner, the place would seem exotic and fascinating with the variances of species that frequented the place. There were at least twenty races represented among the patrons that spanned the bar and booths around the edges. To the untrained eye, it would seem like a veritable melting pot of intergalactic travelers.

Jagger knew better. The representatives in this bar had nothing to do with travelers who happened to stop by this bar because others had heard it was the place to be. No. This place was full of pilots and workers who had frequently gotten stuck here for one reason or another and never managed to find a way off-planet. Many had been downed by windstorms in the wrong season. Others gambled too much. And still more were interplanetary migrant workers. From season to season, they would follow the work. There were those in here that came and went every year, and some that got stuck because they didn't get out before the second season.

To them, this place was a tomb, and the trained eye could find that in each of their faces. Every one of them, with the few exceptions of legitimate passers-by had a characteristic expression of denial and confusion. Each species had it's own way about them, but in this place, there was little question when you looked at someone. Even those who were not known for facial expressions could be clearly pointed out.

There was a distinct solemnity around those could not leave by choice. In one species, it might be sunken eyes, and in others there actual skin tone would change color. There were two Voorundums in earlier today that had grown hair on their previously mane-free heads.

Besides the locals, about the only people that came in this place were stray travelers stopping to refuel at the nearby port or the occasional tourists who had heard about the winds that came and wanted to see it for themselves. It really was a sight to see in the evenings on the mountainside of the town with the wind swirling into giant upside down cones against the hilly backdrop. The perspective alone could make someone think that the cones were larger than they really were.

But this woman really stood out in the crowd. She was in here with a purpose. That in and of itself made her a commodity. A commodity that Jagger knew right away he needed to exploit.

So Jagger watched her from the time she sat down. Jagger liked to think of himself as an opportunist. He liked to watch people and find a way to get what he wanted from them. He never liked to hurt anyone, but if he could find a way to benefit from someone, he would. That was one of the reasons he like this planet and town so much. The people that came here almost always needed something. If he could not provide what they needed, he could find a way, for a price.

This woman needed something, and he would find out what. He watched her attentively as she placed a bet on one of the H'rafa races. He paid attention to what and how much she was drinking. He took notes on everything he saw that she did. It could come in handy later. He noticed her preoccupation with the Bollen and his handy man-machine. Jagger didn't think much of the ARTs, nor did he care. He didn't get in their way if they didn't get in his. They were glorified scanners as far as he was concerned.

After a couple hours of sitting there, he hadn't gathered anything that seemed too informative, until the dealer began packing up. She downed her drink and got very anxious. She had some intention of dealing with the Bollen in a less formal setting. She was stopped short, however by a little man with a big attitude and a friend to match. This could get very interesting.

The little man seemed quite upset with her about something, but she never gave him time to talk. She must have known exactly what he was talking about, because she didn't waste any time listening to him. She kicked his friend in a very sensitive area (which made Jagger cringe), after which he fell rather heavily and pushed the

little man aside.

This woman could take care of herself. Jagger might have to be careful with this one. He dropped what he owed on the bar, without tip. Jagger never tipped. It was bad for his own business. People never gave him extra money for anything, so why should he give someone extra for doing what they were paid to do.

He made it a point to get in her way. He'd noticed a data-pad bulging in one of her front pockets. He hadn't used his pick-pocketing skills in some time, but it did come in handy. With a little luck, it might give him some information as to where she was going after her encounter.

Once she was out the door, he would follow her. He could see from his vantage point the direction she started in, so he could wait a few seconds before going after her. At the door, he watched her, to make sure that she wasn't herself watching for someone following. She never looked back, so he pursued.

She moved rather slowly most of the way, but was a bit jumpy at certain points, probably afraid she might drop her quarry. He got quite a bit closer to her. The crowd, although mild, afforded him that ability. He was sure that she hadn't seen him at any time. No, she was too focused on the task at hand.

By the time she turned a corner up the street a bit from where they started, he was only a handful of steps behind her. When she went into the alley, he saw her pulling out a circuit scanner from her left leg. She was going to use it on the *ART*. He had heard the rumors, too that they could stun and confuse the *ART* for a time, but he had also heard that it didn't work all the time. He would have to help her and fast.

But then again, what could he do against this thing. He wasn't exactly a warrior, and it was easily stronger than he was. By his natural size he would be. With the added mechanical functionality, it was even stronger.

He looked around for something that he could use, and there it was: a hover-bike. He may not be able to beat it up, but he could certainly knock it down.

Fortunately, it didn't take much to start one of these; it was an older model. All he had to do was pull back the thruster lever and wrap the igniter wire around the transfer conduit. Simple as can be, it was on in just a couple of seconds.

He popped the thruster lever back down and he was off around the corner. She had not strayed far from the corner yet, though. He nearly hit her as

he rounded the edge. Fortunately for her, she was nimble and jumped away. He headed straight for the *ART*, hoping to hit it, but the Bollen got scared and ran into it for him. Once he passed them, he glanced back and saw that they were both lying on the ground.

She was on her own now. Once he had rounded the next turn, he pulled it over and stopped. Jagger had to see what she had in that data-card before he'd lost sight of her.

Jackpot. Her ship's berth assignment was on the very first screen. That was rather careless of her. No matter, he'd simply go there and wait for her.

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d20 Review: The Deep

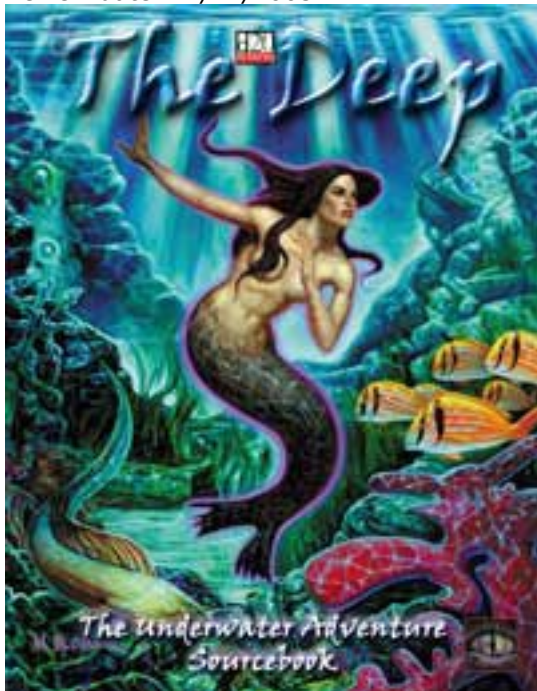
"The Deep: the Underwater Adventure Sourcebook"

Authors: Susannah Redelfs

Publisher: [Mystic Eye Games](#)

Reviewed by: *Bradford Ferguson*

Review date: 11/17/2003



Rating Snapshot

CLASS: Alternative Ruleset (Underwater)

STR: 16 (*Physical*). Hardback with sturdy sewn-in binding.

DEX: 14 (*Organization*). To use the book, especially the settings, you will have to flip around, but book has a handy index.

CON: 16 (*Quantity of the Content*). Web enhancements make me feel like more could have been included, but they stopped at 256 pages.

INT: 18 (*Quality of Content*). The writing is very good. The feel and flavor are excellent.

WIS: 12 (*Options & Adaptability*). It would be a huge change to impose upon existing campaigns. Genre seems limited, though interesting.

CHA: 14 (*Look & Feel*). Left Margin flipping is cool. Layout and art are good. Interior is black and white.

Scoring definitions.

18 = Superior. Best of the best.

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

14 = Good. Most gamers would like this.

12 = Fair. Some gamers would like this.

10 = Average. Most gamers would be indifferent.

8 = Subpar. Flawed, but not without promise.

6 = Bad. Most gamers would dislike this.

4 = Very Bad. Among the Dirty Dozen.

2 = Inferior. Worst of the worst.

From the Back Cover

"Beneath the waves, creatures monstrous and unfamiliar swim all around you in primal hunger, and they're all looking straight at you. Everything that swims here is food for something, and while this may be as true on land as in the sea, the sea is much more obvious in her hunger. In the sea, your focus is reduced to two critical question: Will you feed? Or will you feed something else?"

The Deep is a 256 page aquatic campaign guide and sourcebook offering comprehensive rules for underwater adventuring. This resource provides you with all the material you need to start an aquatic adventure today."

Presentation

The Deep is a 256-pages hardback with a very sturdy sewn-in binding (the pages are sewn into the binding). There is an inside front color cover and an inside back color cover. The inside covers are color maps of the "Sea of Ishamark" which are done by the talented Ed Bouelle. The interior is black and white and there is a good amount of interior art that ranges from nice gray scale art to sketchy but effective ink pieces. The layout is excellent and the borders show coral formations and other sea forms and the borders are not overpowering.

I realize that this sounds bizarre, but I have to mention the left-hand margin of the book. If you get this book, or simply thumb through it at the store, you have to give *The Deep* the flip-book treatment while staring at the left margin. That's right folks, the left margin is animated if you flip through the pages! Crazy!

Introduction

The introduction is a real eye-popper. It weighs in at 20 pages and discusses real-world ocean ecology and d20 rules for the underwater environment. It helps to have seen a couple of Discovery shows about the deep ocean in order to follow some of the discussion; however, overall it was an insightful discussion. What would a Mystic Eye book be like without features? Susannah Redelfs introduces a new feature with the d20 rules that she presents as several of the rules have both a PC Smackdown and a PC Bailout entry. **PC Smackdown** is for Dungeon Masters who want brutal realism, and **PC Bailout** is for DMs who want an in-game effect but do not want to reduce the fun factor. In addition, the Introduction gives a good taste for how comprehensive the book is with rules on topics including Diver's Madness, Bliss of the Deep, Disorientation, Claustrophobia, Pressure, and Surfacing Effects.

System

The Deep provides rules and background on Aquatic Races, Classes, Skills, Feats, Equipment, Aquatic Creatures, Underwater Magic, and Magic Items. *The Deep* is very thorough and well-written and covers everything on a rules basis. I was pleasantly surprised how in-depth *The Deep* is. It is the first book that I have seen with rules for underwater adventuring, and I believe that if you are to incorporate underwater adventures in your d20 game, then *The Deep* is all you really need. Because the subjects of naval combat and swashbuckling have already been thoroughly covered by other d20 products, *The Deep* does not cover much material above the waves.

I thought that the Aquatic Races section was particularly good. There are five races presented: Delphine (dolphin), Merfolk (think mermaids), Selkies (shapechangers with the native form of seal), Sel'varahn (humanoids with webbed hands and feet), and Sharken (sharks). All the races are described in detail - moreso than the races are in the Player's Handbook - with long overview, personality, relations, alignment, and religion entries (in addition to the rules stuff). All of these races cannot survive long on land without the aid of magic; this is similar to how land-based creatures cannot survive in the depths without magic. There is certain symmetry here.

I thought that the whole concept surrounding magic items is very interesting and has excellent flavor. Characters can make vent-tempered items that are tempered in the hydrothermal vents in the sea floor, and crafters can also make living items - items that are infused with tiny living sea creatures. Many of the magic item types that we take for granted with land-based adventuring are simply different in *The Deep* because they need to be. Delphine and Sharken characters do not have arms and hands, so they mount weapons on their "beaks" and attach other items to their fins. I thought all of the rules subsystems in *The Deep* were good as they all enhance the feel of the setting that follows.

Setting

Three major setting areas are detailed in *The Deep*: Crater Bay, the Northern Reach, and the Southern Reach. The setting provided could be adapted to most worlds; however it fits best with the map provided because everything in the setting has its own place. There are many factions with a lot of opportunities for both role-playing and conflict.

I particularly liked the section detailing Crater Bay. There are many alliances in the undersea region, so I had concerns that there were not enough conflicts. I read how the Crater Bay was created and how it is currently and I read "Point of Interest" after "Point of Interest." There are a lot of shrines to good gods and there is the Coralline Council and there are the good and neutral societies. I thought to myself, "Everything is just great! Let's hold hands and sing songs!" Then I read about the land-lubbin' gnomes with their steam-powered inventions who dump their waste into the water and destroy coral reefs (libraries of knowledge)! That was just the tip of the iceberg. There is plenty of conflict and depth to keep things exciting.

There is also a section that details the statistics on characters that are in the setting and in the introductory adventure. The introductory adventure, "The Depths of Reason," is a short adventure that could be completed in one or two game sessions. The adventure is short and there is no map provided, but no map is really needed as every location is described very well that the DM could create a map with no problem. There are several web enhancements in the works, so maybe the adventure map will be in one of them.

Additionally, unlike many d20 books out there, *The Deep* contains a glossary, an index, and a descriptive bibliography.

Conclusion

If you want to run an underwater campaign, *The Deep* is the definitive book for you. You will not be disappointed. If you want to run an adventure or set of adventures under the waves, then this book is for you. You can add an additional element to your campaign and many new intrigues. Overall, I thought the *The Deep* was very comprehensive, though I did have a couple of reservations. I wish there were more maps or layouts. The number of web enhancements worries me that a couple of small corners were cut to get to a specific page count.

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d20 Review: Underdark

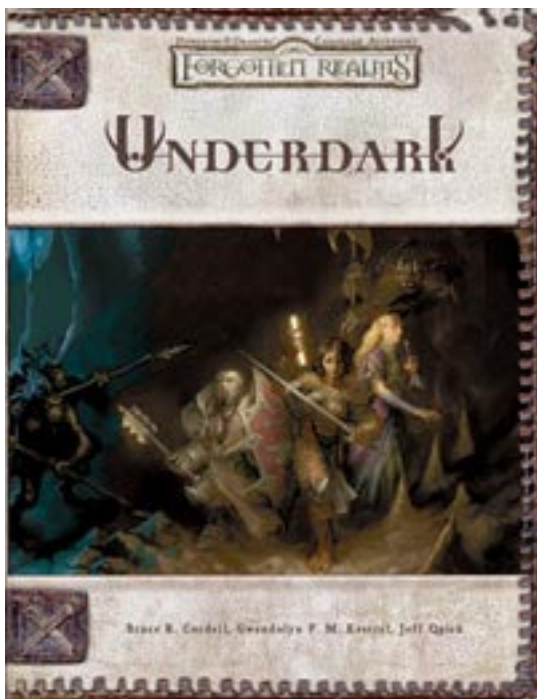
"Underdark"

Authors: Bruce R. Cordell, Gwendolyn F. M. Kestrel, and Jeff Quick

Publisher: [Wizards of the Coast](#)

Reviewed by: *Matt Haught*

Review date: 12/04/2003



From the Back Cover

"The ebon depths of the Underdark have spawned more fables and fears than any other region of Faerun. In this lightless world, the hazards of its unforgiving wilderness are exceeded only by the perils found within the communities of races such as the aboleths, illithids, duergar and drow. Explore the labyrinthine tunnels and endless caverns of the Realms Below to encounter denizens and dangers of one of the most intriguing, inhospitable regions in the *Forgotten Realms* game setting."

Binding and Price

This hardcover book with a glue binding retails at \$32.95. *Underdark* has 191 pages of content and this review is based on a review copy.

First Impressions

The characteristic *Forgotten Realms* cover design bespeaks this book's lineage from the first glance. Being one of the many gamers who fell in love with the Underdark long before D&D 3.x came on the scene, I was anxious to see how the current crop of designers would deal with the setting.

As soon as I began perusing *Underdark*, something leaped out at me: the Realms Below aren't just for Drow anymore. The Dark Elves are still well represented and documented, but they are not the sole focus of the book. Kuo-toa and illithids are given equal space, and even the grimlocks have their own racial feat. While this struck a sad note with the drow-ophile in

Rating Snapshot

CLASS: Campaign Expansion Supplement

STR: 14 (*Physical*). Typical glued-in hardcover binding.

DEX: 12 (*Organization*). The chapters are organized well, but the sidebars mean some items and optional rules are in odd chapters.

CON: 13 (*Quantity of the Content*). Decent price per page, considering the hard binding.

INT: 15 (*Quality of Content*). The specialized content goes above and beyond previous products in the genre.

WIS: 12 (*Options & Adaptability*). While useful for DM's, ordinary players will not find much use for this book. It is also campaign-specific.

CHA: 14 (*Look & Feel*). Some illustrations are better than others. Specifically, some of the Kuo-toa look rather silly.

Scoring definitions.

18 = Superior. Best of the best.

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

14 = Good. Most gamers would like this.

12 = Fair. Some gamers would like this.

10 = Average. Most gamers would be indifferent.

8 = Subpar. Flawed, but not without promise.

6 = Bad. Most gamers would dislike this.

4 = Very Bad. Among the Dirty Dozen.

2 = Inferior. Worst of the worst.

me, it is undoubtedly a good move for the game itself. The Realms Below, as a campaign setting, always seemed to suffer from a bit of racial tunnel vision, if you'll pardon the pun. With *Underdark*, this is no longer the case.

Introduction

The introduction gives a brief overview of each chapter and a list of non-core D&D books necessary for full utilization of the book, as well as a list of creatures from the *Monsters of Faerun* and *Monster Manual II* along with appropriate substitutes from the core *Monster Manual*.

Chapter 1: Races

This chapter introduces several races for PC's and NPC's that are appropriate for Underdark campaigns. Some, like the Drow, have appeared in previous FR products. Others, like the Chitine and Deep Imaskari, are new content. The races have good flavor and identity, and in some cases illuminate races that were once limited to monsters such as the Kuo-toa and Grimlocks. Of the new races, only the Deep Imaskari and the Drow are likely to see much PC useage outside of purely Underdark campaigns. The other races are either high-ECL or not particularly suited to non-evil characters or both. The Drow will always have their cult following of Drizzt fans and munchkins, though, and the Deep Imaskari make excellent mages without any level adjustment. There are additional races listed at the end of the chapter, but these are almost universally suited for NPC or monster roles.

All of the PC races in this chapter are described with WotC's customarily high level of cultural detail. While the subtle nuances of culture are reserved for later portions of the book, general racial trends are stated in a concise, easy-to-read manner.

Chapter 2: Regions and Feats

This chapter contains six new racial character regions and 23 new feats. Many of these feats, such as Highborn Drow and Axeshield, are limited to individual races of the Underdark. Others are useful to any PC who finds himself in the lightless tunnels beneath Toril, especially if the new rules for cramped quarters are used. More importantly, this chapter introduces Earth Node feats that augment the Earth Node spellcasting described later in the book.

Chapter 3: Prestige Classes

Chapter Three introduces several new Prestige Classes (PrC's). Some of these are apparently suited primarily for NPC's, such as the Illithid Body Tamer, Sea Mother Whip or the Inquisitor of the Drowning Goddess. Others, such as the Prime Underdark Guide and Cavelord are excellent for PC's who call the Underdark home. The Deep Diviner PrC was created to make use of the Node Spellcasting system introduced later. The Drow Judicator is basically a new version of the Blackguard geared specifically for Drow. The Arachnomancer and Yathchol Webrider are excellent arcane caster classes for Drow or others who delve into spider-related mysteries. The Vermin Keeper is an excellent twist on the Druid, and unlike some of these PrC's, is equally useful above ground as below. The Imaskari Vengeance Taker makes an interesting variant of the Assassin, combining some of the aspects of the Ranger with the Assassin's dedication to the kill.

These PrC's are well thought out and interesting, though they are of limited usefulness outside of an Underdark campaign. Few of them will prove attractive to the average PC, but they open up new worlds for DM's looking for a novel challenge for their players.

Chapter 4: Magic and Spells

This chapter finally explains and codifies one of the best known, but least understood, aspects of the Underdark: *Faerzress*. This energy, as explained in *Underdark*, comes from Earth Nodes. Earth Nodes are centers of power, similar in concept to the intersection of ley lines. Chapter 4 introduces rules for harnessing the power of Earth Nodes, including adverse effects on certain types of spells such as teleportation and divination.

Next, Chapter 4 discusses *Portals* and their tremendous usage throughout the Underdark. New portal qualities are discussed, as is the phenomenon known as *portal seepage*. An alternative version of the Portal domain is also presented.

Speaking of domains, *Underdark* adds the Balance and Watery Death domains. The Balance domain deals with maintaining the balance of good versus evil, as well as that of law versus chaos. The Watery Death domain is limited to worshippers of Umberlee or Blibdoolpoolp,

goddess of the Kuo-toa.

The remainder of the chapter is dedicated to new spells, some of which are in fact reprinted from earlier *Forgotten Realms* material. Many of these spells deal with Earth Nodes, while others relate to the Watery Death domain. In particularly, *Reflective Disguise* and its Mass version appealed to me. A mid-level arcane caster can help his party pass undetected through the cosmopolitan cities of the less-friendly Underdark races.

Chapter 5: Equipment and Magic Items

This chapter begins with some specialized weapons and armor found in the Underdark. Razored armor, a repeating hand crossbow and the Kuo-toa's signature pincer staff are among some of the more interesting weapons. Unlike some products, the weapons in *Underdark* are fairly balanced. The razored armor and shields are merely slashing versions of their spiked counterparts, and the dart thruster is what the hand crossbow *should* have been.

The armor ranges from the interesting to the insane. Some of the extras like buoyancy floats and stability weights make little sense, while camouflage and muffling are realistic add-ons for the stealth-conscious rogue, ranger or even fighter. The new armor types introduce the concept of exotic armors requiring specific proficiency to use effectively. However, some of these armors seem more than slightly strange. After all, how often do you see a suit of rubbery hide armor complete with tentacles that assist the user in making trip attacks, or armor with wires extending from it to help the user feel where an invisible opponent is moving? Other exotic armors, such as nightscale and spidersilk, have no real reason for requiring an extra feat other than the fact that they are demonstrably superior to standard PHB armors.

The miscellaneous equipment is interesting, especially the new alchemical items. In addition, there is a new bardic instrument specifically designed for Underdark minstrels. Several new poisons are introduced, though the Drow sleep poison seems greatly underpowered.

The magic weapons introduced in this chapter are a welcome addition to the 3.5 arsenal. *Metalline* weapons will go a long way towards eliminating the need for a caddy just to carry the appropriate longsword for the monster at hand. *Tentacle* weapons give the effect of a *vorpal* weapon with an additional Illithid twist. *Drowcraft* and *Illithidwrought* weapons make areas of *faerzress* even more important.

The armors show similar inventiveness. The Drow and Illithids have their own armors that follow rules similar to their weapons. Rogues, Barbarians and Rangers everywhere will be tossing their mithril breastplates in favor of *halfweight* full plate.

This chapter continues with miscellaneous magic items, artifacts and Illithid flesh grafts. Several of these will prove very attractive to adventurers and NPC's alike. *Underdark* even mentions the *Book of Perfect Balance*. Is this a foreshadowing of a future WotC mature product? Only time will tell.

Chapter 6: Monsters

This chapter introduces some interesting new monsters, as well as updated 3.5 stats for some old favorites. What's impressive about this chapter is the sheer range of CR's represented, from the CR 1/2 Giant Maggot to the CR 23 Illithid Elder Brain. Creatures like the Annihilator and Kuo-toa Leviathan will keep mid- to high-level parties on their toes, while an Ineffable Horror or *Faerzress*-infused Minotaur can challenge lower-level parties. Even the CR 2 Giant Cockroach can be dangerous when encountered in a horde of hundreds.

Chapter 7: Exploring the Underdark

This chapter provides some innovative rules for the special environmental conditions found in the Realms Below. Rules for stale and depleted air, seeping fumes that range from irritating to explosive, and extremes in temperature can be used for attack and defense by the creatures that make their home in the lightless caverns of the Underdark.

Another important aspect of spelunking is the effect of cramped spaces on movement and, more importantly for adventurers, combat. Rules for confined areas' hindering effects on armed combat are explored in detail, and are equally for indoor combat as well as brush-choked forests and jungles.

Encounter tables and a generic "Underdark Primer" round out this excellent chapter.

Chapter 8: Geography

As has become standard for *Forgotten Realms* products, *Underdark* includes a chapter detailing various relevant locales. Familiar environs like Menzoberranzan and Blingdenstone are updated to take into account events in recent novels, and new locations have been added to flesh out the Underdark like never before. While this is standard fare for this campaign setting, this chapter is still well done.

Conclusion

Underdark picks up where *City of the Spider Queen* leaves off, and expands the Realms Below to include races and cultures that were either unknown or neglected in earlier editions of the game. While it is of limited use to PC's, DM's who wish to incorporate the Underdark into their game will find this book invaluable. Given the popularity of the Realms Below in the general gaming public, this book should see wide useage.

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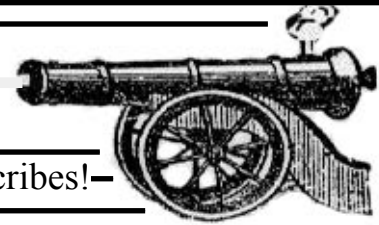
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BEG Captured!

On Monday of this week the infamous and notorious BEG was captured in a raid on his stronghold slum house.

A combined effort between the Silven Mercenary Guild (SMG) and the Battalion for Upholding Silven's Heritage (BUSH) conducted the raid in the daylight hours of Monday afternoon.

No fighting was reported, and the BEG was taken 'without incident' said Chief Marshal Monger.

It is not clear at this time where the BEG is being held, or for that matter why. The unnamed BEG has yet to be charged with any crimes but charges are expected to be filed by the city of Silven shortly.

The slum lords of Silven have filed a formal protest, citing unauthorized entry, unmitigated use of force, and invasion of privacy. The slum lords have also filed an injunction with the courts to halt all proceedings and expedite the BEG to the slums for trial.

It is unknown what history the BEG has, but with the amount of attention focused in right now on the city of Silven and its recent militaristic and imperialistic trends, there is sure to be substantial fallout.

Mayor Strikes Deal with Local Thieves Guild, Upsets other Thieves Guilds

Last Tuesday the Mayor of Silven struck a four year contract with the renown thieves guild The Marut Kamahl. The deal grants the guild supreme access to all thieving operations within and around the city of Silven for the duration of the contract. In recompense the guild will refund the city of Silven approximately a one third share of the plunder.

Upset over the contract, two other thieves guilds, the Brown Band and the Darklings, sought to go to the courts for an appeal. Litigation is proceeding slowly on the case, but no changes are expected to take place any time soon.

In the meantime, the Mayor issued a public statement, 'I have formalized a deal that will ensure success and wealth for all the citizens of Silven, except for those robbed, of course. This is your tax money hard at work, and the stolen money will go right back into your pockets in the form of new schools, better working conditions, and more patrols.'

Gods Pass New Laws, World Confused

Members of a special committee convened Thursday at the first ever 'Symposium on the State of the World'. The committee was formed hastily last month to look into the widespread changes that swept the world overnight last July.

One Symposium member, Silven's own Orph Maloney testified, 'One day my spells worked one way, the next day they worked a different way!' to a startled crowd of onlookers.

Indeed, magical spells were not all that was affected. Many mundane and magical items have increased or even decreased in value, and provide different benefits to their owners. Many merchants are swamped with rabid customers seeking to return defunct items.

It is unclear at the cause of the changes in the universe and many attribute them to the Gods themselves. But until a formal inquiry into the situation is suggested, the Symposium is left to sort out the mess and seek a means to handle it.

-Reporting from Town Hall, for the Fodder Canon, Dak Tamble.

Travelling Gypsies Set up Permanent Residence, Woman Confused

The caravan of Gypsies that arrived last month has not yet left. This has some citizens of Silven confused.

Local seamstress and mother of six Jacqueline Vorax says, 'I thought Gypsies came and left? It's been a good month and they are still out there every night, boozing it up. The kidnapping rate has gone sky high, and the number of public beatings is at an all time high. They can't just sit out there. I don't care much for the beatings and rapes, but I'd tolerate them if it were our own fine citizens and not some non-traveling band of good-for-nothings.'

No Gypsy was available for comment.

Pothole Monsters Snatch Third Victim

In the last several weeks, the Pothole Monster, as citizens are calling it, has snatched its third victim, a seventy year old grandmother of seven.

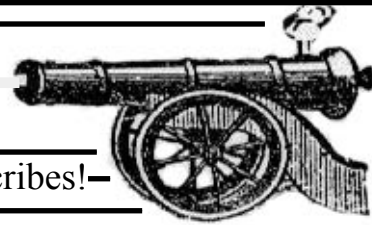
Hobblin Graknee was last seen in the south side of the city with a bag from the meat market around her arm. Moments later, she was gone.

Onlookers described the scene, 'I was over here getting a chuck of beef for dinner, when I saw this old lady walking down the road. I saw her heading right into a pothole and I attempted to yell but it was too late, and in she went.'

The scene then turned to a horrified mass of screaming and panic. When the riot settled down three minutes later, brave onlookers ventured to the pothole to peer inside and found nothing but mud.

The mayor had no comment on the events, and neither did the City Guard.

The Fodder Cannon is a monthly humour section by Lance Kepner and Dana Driscoll. Readers are encouraged to contribute their own amusing shorts. Send to adriana@yahoo.com.



Public Poll: New Years Resolution?

Orph Maloney, Wizard Extraordinaire

"Be a better warrior."

Dak Tamble, Bard Wonder

"Work less. Sing more. Stop being disintegrated."

Brob Weeny, Ranger lookalike

"Do I look like that guy..uhm... Arathorn yet? Oh what was his name?"

Arch Druid Kamiya,

"More neutral less good."

Marcus, the drunken Ranger

"Miss my D&D campaign less."

Classifieds:

Wanted: Illusions. Do you have illusions you are looking to rid yourself of? Disbelieve no more, Farky Finkensnort is here to purchase all at top dollar.

Lucrative Investment Opportunity! All interested parties contact Sly Slipperysocks for more information. No goblins involved.

Looking for Luv? Look no more, Sophia's House of Luv has opened for business. Discretion guaranteed. Your choice of Toothy or toothless wenches.

Liquidation Sale: Frozen Elementals. The latest fad has hit the city of Silven! All sizes. Entire stock must go now!

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