

SORCERER & SWORD



THE FIRST SUPPLEMENT FOR SORCERER

SORCERER & SWORD

by Ron Edwards

SUPPLEMENT #1 FOR SORCERER

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ADEPT
PRESS

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CHICAGO

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The concept of "stance" as presented in Chapter Seven was originally developed in the on-line **rec.gaming.frp.advocacy** discussion group in the early 1990s, and I learned about it years later through conversations with John Marron. On-line discussions of stance may be found at The Gaming Outpost (www.gamingoutpost.com), The Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com), and at the **r.g.f.a.** discussion sites (see archives at www.google.com) and (www.darkshire.org/!jkhkim/rpg/styles/faq_v1/faq0.art). The presentation here represents my own interpretation of already-existing terms, as well as one of my own, and any internal inconsistencies should be ascribed to me and not to the original developers of the terms.

The first SORCERER customer ever was Andy Rothfusz; the first customer for the book version was Dav Harnish.

The publishing and creative achievements of the Apophis Consortium, Issaries Inc, and Wicked Press, in their respective fashions, earn my highest admiration and should be acknowledged for their impact on my decisions and policies.

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PREFACE

This is the first supplement for SORCERER. You need to have a copy of SORCERER already (do people really need to be told that, or is it some sort of a lawyer thing?).

Supplements for SORCERER are written to accord with the following principles.

1. **Innovative role-playing game design.** If the topic can be run using the basic SORCERER rules or ideas and principles from other role-playing games, then it's not worthy of a supplement.
2. **Worthy source material.** It's no secret that I take the literary/media sources for SORCERER pretty seriously. A topic for a supplement will reach beyond the bibliography in the basic rules and raise new issues for play; also, it will be examined in some detail with decent scholarship.
3. **Service to your own game.** The supplement's purpose will always be to provide a good engine or materials for your own role-playing. It will never be thinly disguised fiction.

The material presented here is my tribute to the original character Conan, to his literary peers and worthy descendants, and to all of their authors.

Chapter One:

FANTASTIC ADVENTURE



DEFINITIONS

I've been reading violent, heroic fantasy all my life, starting with Greek and Norse mythology, then discovering the original Conan fiction in the letters pages of a Marvel comic book, and continuing with an ongoing discovery of a brilliant, dark, often marginalized body of literature. It cannot be matched for its unique blend of excitement, aggression, imagery, intensity, transgression, and joy. Ultimately, I wanted to achieve that feeling during role-playing Sorcerer – to finish a play session, and everyone closes the folders and gathers the dice, but with a difference: what Fritz Leiber called in "The Lords of Quarmall" the "leopard look," in our eyes.

This supplement is the result.

What is heroic fantasy, sword-and-sorcery, *et cetera*? Best to start by explaining what it is **not**. It is **not**:

1. What book publishers today call "fantasy," which usually includes:
 - ▼ An **a priori** carefully detailed, mapped, and ethnographically structured made-up world.
 - ▼ A variety of non-human, picturesque races, with well-defined associated philosophies and societies.
 - ▼ A protagonist whose story includes self-help, self-discovery, and romantic development.

2. What book publishers and straight-to-video call “sword and sorcery,” which usually includes
 - ▼ A grunting, touchy dolt of a protagonist with gymnasium musculature.
 - ▼ Incredibly stupid sorcerers whose plans make no sense and whose magic, bluntly, doesn’t work.
 - ▼ Fetishistic attention to macho posturing, the approval of other guys, and ownership of a sword (!).
 - ▼ Models looking bored and uncomfortable in their costumes.
3. What you find in the majority of so-called “fantasy role-playing games”:
 - ▼ A feverish concern with killing monsters and surviving momentary perils.
 - ▼ Mechanical, possessions-based competence, that is, where being better depends on having more stuff.
 - ▼ Long lists of highly specific spells, essentially a technology called magic.

What is heroic fantasy, then? It is action-adventure all right, but stuffed chock-full with horror, surrealism, and phantasmagoria. Somewhere. Somewhen. With a hero who makes no apologies and dominates the imagination, whose exploits demand a setting overflowing with imagery. Stories of Elric, Conan, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, and many others generated the wonderful worlds of their heroes over time, with the concern of the moment being the intense rush of a great character in a great story.

SORCERER AND SWORD, yes, is based on flashing swords, looming monsters, demon lords, fistfuls of treasure, horrifically evil spells, and a shadowy world that does not indeed exist. But it specifically arises from the amazing literature of the 1920s and 30s, and from the literature that was later written with knowledge and love of its origins. The commercial, bowdlerized, pale trash today called heroic fantasy, especially the “barbarian jock” stuff, is nowhere to be found here.

HOW ROLE-PLAYING THIS GENRE WORKS

Doctrinal pronouncement

This entire supplement throws out one of the most cherished passages in role-playing texts, the one about how the GM is the story-teller

In all, there should be, herein, a large dose of rousing adventures with magic, action, but also heart, humanity, and vision. Some will call these violent tales, and say it’s violence for violence’s sake. Let them. The rest of us will be enriched by far, and stand in awe of the strength and splendor of our own human spirits, reflected in these gorgeous, crimson fantasies.

—J. A. Salmonson, Introduction to Heroic Visions

person and the player acts out the part of the character. In order for the supplement to be useful or to make any sense at all, you must take that concept and kill it cleanly with your sword.

It is flatly impossible for one person to “author a story” and the other to “determine the actions of the protagonist.” This contradiction has been the source of much agony through the history of role-playing, or at least the brand of role-playing which concerns itself with creating stories.

The doctrine for *SORCERER AND SWORD* relies instead on the following ideas:

- ▼ Playing this game, for all concerned, means creating stories about one or more heroic protagonists.
- ▼ The player produces the protagonist’s decisions and thus directly creates the story.
- ▼ The GM makes it possible for such play to occur, and therefore has great powers over events in the game-world. However, he or she does not determine the protagonist’s actions, and must fully respond to those actions when they do occur.

Therefore the GM cannot be considered “the narrator” or “the storyteller” in any way, shape, or form. Such an entity exists as the outcome of GM-player interface and continuing creativity. The GM *exists to facilitate the player as primary author*. His or her arbitrate role in game events, as well as most of the Director power over time and space, do remain. But the purpose of that role is inspiring and facilitating, not dictating.

Creating a setting

This supplement does not present an official sword-and-sorcery setting for you to begin to explore. It is an instrument for the role-playing group to create such a setting, using the adventures of protagonists as a means.

The idea is to start with a very sketchy setting, high on potential and atmosphere but low on any details. If there’s a map, it’s practically blank. However, the group does begin with strong player-character concepts. Each player must feel a sense of his or her own, awesome, heroic protagonist as a potentially all-time great character, and be ready to generate a fanboy-level appreciation in the other members of the group.

Each adventure will then “color in” a section of the setting, in terms of geography, history, NPCs, magic details, and more. The setting is a garment for the heroes to wear, and it will only acquire character, detail, and a heart of its own through the hero’s use of it – that is, through play. Bit by bit, adventure by adventure, the setting acquires depth and weight in exactly the same manner that the classic fantasy worlds were developed – over time, through the

actions and experiences of the heroes. Each time you play, the more you are expanding the scope and filling in the details of the setting.

To review, playing **SORCERER AND SWORD** relies on the following steps.

1. Decide very generally what sort of heroes are going to be involved. This step has no numbers, no points, no rules. It's just a matter of reading and discussing. That's why Chapter Two is strictly bibliography and a little musing about the genre.
2. The GM makes up a suitable setting, but very, very vaguely. This is not a detailed dungeon with outsiders. Chapter Three presents some concepts for this step.
3. The players make use of the detailed character creation rules in Chapter Four. This results in a genre-appropriate, individualized, intense, rip-your-soul-out PC that **SORCERER** players come to expect, and once they get going, the GM should shudder at what they have wrought. The expanded sorcery rules in Chapter Five and further rules notions and details in Chapter Six should provide all the scope you need for the most astonishing magic and toughest fighters to be found in all of role-playing games.
4. Well, there's nothing for it now, you simply have to get these characters into motion. Chapter Seven is all about applying the doctrine presented above, as well as concepts from all the preceding chapters, toward solid story-telling and role-playing.
5. Once you've played, you now have more setting than you started with. Repeat 1–4, and again, and again.

EXAMPLES OF STEP #1. An intrepid GM discusses playing **SORCERER AND SWORD** with friends and asks what they might like to do, offering some suggestions. The following possibilities appear:

- ▼ Roguish con artists and adventurers, sauntering or swaggering from one escapade to another, with lots of dancing girls and exotic settings.
- ▼ Brooding nightmarish survivors of childhood trauma who continually strike out against the interior demons that plague them.
- ▼ Survivors of a blasted, futuristic landscape, with demon/mutant buddies, consulting computers thinking they're demonic oracles.

Consider three outcomes of this conversation.

One might go with the first option and start thinking about kind of an Arabian Nights type setting, with a strong dash of Chris Achilleos' artwork. What sort of demons, sorcerous hazards, and locales might fit? Images come to mind: stone-paved cities with minarets and towers, naked babes (or guys, whatever) with the bodies of snakes from the waist down, hot glances over the tops of veils, and chases on the backs of giant colorful birds.

Another might go with the second option and reach for the most horrific

Berni Wrightson would seem like a good reference.

bizarre techno-sorcery.

SORCERER AND SWORD. And again, they are only examples.

You are authors. The work is to be your own.

Chapter Two:

THE LITERATURE



This chapter is kind of a critical essay with a bibliography embedded in it. You can skip it if you want to delve straight into sorcerous rules and doings, or are otherwise disinclined to peruse a book report, but please come back to it some day. This history explains the literary foundation of heroic-sorcerous fantasy in its finest form and raises some issues that can go a long way toward the success of *SORCERER AND SWORD* role-playing.

THE LITERATURE

The originals: 1920s through 1950s

The following works appeared mostly as short stories in pulp magazines like *Weird Tales*, beginning in the late 1920s and continuing through a couple of decades. The authors considered themselves not to be a branch of adventure fiction, but an adventurous branch of horror/surrealist fiction. The contemporaries (e.g. Howard, Smith) were part of a larger social circle that included H. P. Lovecraft and others. Through the 1940s, a few imitations and "tributes" appeared as well, in the several-times resurrected *Weird Tales*, other magazines, and the long-running fanzine *Amra*.

ROBERT E. HOWARD

- ▼ The best Conan stories: "The Frost Giant's Daughter", "Rogues in the House", "Tower of the Elephant", "Queen of the Black Coast", "Black Colossus", "A Witch Shall be Born", "People of the Black Circle", "Red Nails", "Beyond the Black River", "The Phoenix on the Sword", "The Scarlet Citadel", "The Hour of the Dragon". These are quite simply among the best adventure fiction of the 20th century.
- ▼ Less-notable Conan stories: "Pool of the Black One", "The Vale of Lost Women", "Shadows in Zamboula", "The Black Stranger", "The Slithering Shadow", "The Devil in Iron", "Shadows in the Moonlight". These are often fun, but they're adolescent and repetitive at best.
- ▼ It is highly recommended you avoid any Conan story besides these! The vast majority of material with "Conan" written over it was not written by Howard.
- ▼ Also well-worth reading are the intensely moody Kull, Bran Mac Morn, and Solomon Kane stories, and the novel *Almuric*, in which Howard provides his distinctive version of Burroughs' Barsoom stories.

Oh, little singers, what know
you of
Ungodly, slimy shapes that glide
and crawl
Out of unreckoned gulfs when
midnights fall,
To haunt the poet's slumbering,
and close
Against his eyes thrust up their
hissing head,
And mock him with their eyes so
serpent-red?

—R.E. Howard,
*Which Will Scarcely Be
Understood*

C.L. MOORE

Jirel of Joiry introduced the first great female protagonist to sword-and-sorcery.

CLARK ASHTON SMITH

Hyperborea, Zothique, Xiccarph, The Last Incantation. This is the horrific adventure fiction that H. P. Lovecraft considered the finest of his experience.

FRITZ LEIBER

Leiber is a Fantasy Grand Master and one of the best authors in print, a worthy heir to James Branch Cabell, with a range of fiction well beyond that considered here. The irreverent career of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser is found in the collections *Swords and Deviltry*, *Swords Against Death*, *Swords in the Mist*, and *Swords Against Wizardry*. I suggest focusing on the earlier-written stories like "Adept's Gambit". The final two books in the series, *Swords of Lankhmar* and *Swords and Ice Magic*, are not as useful for present purposes.

GARDNER F. FOX

A raft of Kothar and Kyrik books, which are each at least 33.3% spoof. These aren't really up to the quality of the other works on this list, but they have their moments, partly because they don't take themselves seriously. Furthermore, Kyrik may be the first up-front, demon-summoning sorcerer hero, years before Elric.

NORVELL W. PAGE

Flame Winds, Sons of the Bear God. More Howard-inspired, pseudo-historical adventure. A great deal of later, lesser fiction adopted some of Page's prose style and plot features.

These works of course represent only a sub-set of fantasy fiction, and they have a specific relationship to two other branches that is beyond the scope of this essay. The interested reader might look into high fantasy (Lord Dunsany, George MacDonald, C.S. Lewis, E.R. Eddison, J.R.R. Tolkien, and Jack Vance) and serious, scholarly horror (William Hope Hodgson, Arthur Machen, Robert W. Chambers, and H.P. Lovecraft).

The fans (60s to early 70s)

During this period, heroic fantasy broke into book publishing, spearheaded in part by the Amra writers coming of age with their own work. Conan finally saw print in book form in the famous Lancer paperbacks, then Sphere paperbacks, and finally, the U.S.-published Ace paperbacks, culminating in a 12-book Conan-canon by the late 70s. Unfortunately, the editors, L. Sprague deCamp and Lin Carter, were far more committed to a unity among all Conan stories written by anyone (most especially themselves), rather than to the original Howard stories, which make up about a fourth of the 1960s material. They edited and revised extensively, added details to link the variously-authored stories, decided on a chronology, and filled in "gaps" with their own stories. Berkley Books tried to counter this trend by publishing some of the original, untouched stories, but the effort was short-lived.

Throughout this period, certain pastiche conventions crept into the genre, both in the additions to the Conan stories and in the host of imitations. You are certain to recognize them:

- ▼ "Barbarian" means an irritable psychopath with no actual fun qualities, who hates and fears magic.
- ▼ The hero never loses a fight, and his combat prowess is expressed in terms of raw strength. (Howard's Conan won fights primarily through speed, stamina, and skill – and he didn't always win.)
- ▼ People run around wearing only loincloths, displaying musculature that

wasn't even possible prior to the invention of the Nautilus machine. (Howard's Conan wore a shirt, most of the time.)

- ▼ Women conform perfectly to the Madonna/whore complex. (Howard had his faults concerning female characters, but not this one.)
- ▼ Faceless red-shirt "city guards" appear at plot junctures for the hero kill. As far as I can tell, such characters and scenes are completely absent from the literature until the 1960s.
- ▼ Conflict concerns threats to the manly-man image rather than human relationships or confrontation with true horror.

Some editors tried to counter this trend, but the majority generally stayed with the tame-pastiche approach rather than breaking new ground. The real stand-out writers (e.g. Moorcock, Wagner) were all too few.

Comics played an important role during the middle 70s. Marvel's Roy Thomas, a Howard purist, adapted all of Howard's Conan into comics form (*Conan the Barbarian*), with especially good art by Barry Windsor Smith and others. As the four-color monthly comic became blander after its first couple of years, Thomas turned his attention to the black and white comics magazine *The Savage Sword of Conan*, which at its peak was probably the most faithful and rigorous Howard tribute ever done.

The best sorcerous fantasy from this time includes the following:

MICHAEL MOORCOCK

Elric of Melniboné, *The Weird of the White Wolf* (specifically the story "The Dreaming City"), *Stormbringer*; *The Book of Swords* trilogy. The jury is still out regarding whether Moorcock is a literary genius or, well, not, but these specific stories (with later-written Elric stories omitted) are classics.

POUL ANDERSON

The Broken Sword, *Hrolf Kraki's Saga*. Inspired by the classic Icelandic sagas (e.g. *Njal's Saga*) and given a distinctly pulp-sorcery twist.

ANDREW J. OFFUT (editor)

Swords Against Darkness, vols. 1–5. One of the only outlets for serious sword-and-sorcery writers during this time, although perhaps a little too well reined in by a single editorial vision. Especially notable are Ramsey Campbell's Ryre stories.

GERALD W. PAGE and HANK REINHARDT

Heroic Fantasy. A fine collection whose optimistic, enthusiastic introduction is heart-wrenching in these dark days.

KARL EDWARD WAGNER

Night Winds, Bloodstone, Dark Crusade, Death Angel's Shadow, Darkness Weaves. Utterly unpretentious, balls-to-the-wall, frenzied sorcerous pulp. Full of drugs and slaughter and brooding; highly recommended.

Again, I do not intend to detract from the excellent fantasy of other types written during this period. The works of Ursula LeGuin, Lloyd Alexander, Roger Zelazny, Evangeline Walton, and many others should not be discounted. However, they do not belong to the source material for this supplement.

Betrayal: sometime in the late 70s and beyond

Heroic fantasy basically died a horrible death during this time, despite the efforts of dedicated editors like Jessica Amanda Salmonson and Karl Edward Wagner, as well as talented writers. Why? First, I really can't over-emphasize how poorly, however well meant, Conan and the rest of this genre have been treated by deCamp and Carter, as well as by publishing houses in general. Special dishonorable mention goes to authors John Jakes and John Norman (creators of Brak the Barbarian and Gor, respectively), who capitalized shamelessly on the barbarian-jock image for their bland publications hardly worthy of the name fiction.

Second, regarding the flagship character, continuing to the present, the movie conglomerate has taken over entirely, completely shutting out book and story publication that doesn't accord with its iconic subject. The comics Conan became an advertisement for the movie version, and a whole bevy of B-movie swordslingers has emerged in complete accord with Norman and Jakes style fiction. The original twelve Conan books, faux-Howard as they were, are a model of purity compared to the dozens now available. Conan's identity as a character in a saga has vanished in the shuffle of pastiche and repetitive text.

Some still struggled against the tide. The best include:

JESSICA AMANDA SALMONSON

Tomoe Gozen, The Golden Naginata, Thousandshrine Warrior; (editor) *Heroic Visions*, vols. 1–2; *Amazons*, vols. 1–2. The samurai trilogy is a superb, thought-provoking, Kurosawa-inspired work, and Salmonson's selection of stories for the collections is both scholarly and inspired.

ANDREW J. OFFUT and RICHARD TIERNEY

The Demon in the Mirror, The Eyes of Sarsis, Web of the Spider. Mostly fine and rambunctious adventure, especially the first two books.



DAVID MASON

The Sorcerer's Skull. One of the great little gems of fantasy fiction, little-known, little-read, but brilliant on every page.

DAVID DRAKE

The Dragon Lord, The Mantichore. Historicals with a dark twist, mainly set in the final days of Rome. These stories are not for the timid.

DAVID C. SMITH

The Oron series, the Master of Evil trilogy, and most successfully, *The Sorcerer's Shadow*. Of the many self-perceived heirs to Howard, Smith tried the hardest.

VICTORIA GRAHAM

The Witchstone. Another forgotten gem, featuring a classically arrogant sorcerer hero. Whatever happened to these books, that they were lost so easily?

TANITH LEE

Kill the Dead, Night's Master, Cyrion, Volkhavaar, Companions on the Road. Full of swordplay and wit, these are the work of a leaner, meaner Lee than is found in most of her books.

MICHAEL SHEA

Nifft the Lean. Astonishingly weird, ever-inventive, and never-failingly gory, from one of the literary heirs of Clark Ashton Smith.

TIM LUKEMAN

Rajan, Koren. These unspecified-oriental adventures pack some punch on second reading especially, with a fine example of the adept sorcerer in the character Duhaur.

GORDON D. SHIRREFFS

Calgaich the Swordsman. Solid Celtic-historical adventure, from the short-lived but excellent Playboy Press Paperbacks venture into fantasy fiction.

DARRELL SCHWEITZER

We Are All Legends. Quite likely the most overtly depressing fantasy fiction ever, but always beautiful and thought-provoking.

CHARLES O. SAUNDERS

Imaro, The Quest for Cush, The Trail of Bohu. Howard-inspired muscle-and-guts action, set in fantasy Africa.

CARL SHERRELL

Raum. Another magnificent gem of a short novel, from the demon's point of view.

KARL EDWARD WAGNER (editor)

Echoes of Valor, vols. 1–3. These collections are almost all re-releases or first printings of the original stories of well-known fantasy authors, before editing or re-writing by “collaborators.” Worth the price for Howard’s original “The Black Stranger” alone.

KEITH TAYLOR

Bard, Bard II. Celtic adventure with a real heart, much better than the New Age nonsense usually associated with the setting.

Again, I am not claiming that these works are the only good fantasy fiction available from this period, but rather they are the best of the specifically sorcerous fantasy stories, directly relevant to *SORCERER* and to this supplement. High fantasy and adventure fantasy are different topics entirely.

REFERENCES FOR THE EXOTIC-FIERCE SETTING:

NIGHT’S MASTER, some of THE ARABIAN NIGHTS, the Nehwon stories, RAJAN and KOREN, and TOMOE GOZEN.

REFERENCES FOR THE SCARY FAIRY-TALE SETTING:

The stories by the Brothers Grimm, Mervyn Peake's **GORMENGHAST** trilogy, and Howard's Solomon Kane stories.

REFERENCES FOR THE MUTANT-FUTURE SETTING:

THE PASTEL CITY and **VIRICONIUM NIGHTS** by M. John Harrison, **KELWIN** by Neal Barrett Jr., **WITHERWING** by David Jarrett, and some of the grimmer stories from Jack Vance's **THE DYING EARTH**.

ARE YOU READY?

At the risk of being patronizing, I recommend doing some reading, or re-reading with an eye toward who actually wrote a given story and when. gms should be careful that their players are not wandering into a Sorcerer and Sword session with a casual, "Oh, like Conan and Elric," with their knowledge based only on role-playing rulebooks, Boris Vallejo paintings, and Ator movies. For this material especially, never "just play."

The GM faces a difficult line to walk, as people don't especially like being handed a huge reading assignment. However, he or she should ask for a little, perhaps letting different people read different appropriate source material.

It's also well to discuss the upcoming game among members of the group. It might be good to contrast (1) how players decide what player-characters will do, as opposed to (2) how writers and directors decide what protagonists in stories will do. This supplement is based on the idea that the first be an expression of the second.

To accomplish this goal, everyone should consider what the heroes are all about, as (fictional) people. We know Conan's a bad-ass, but the point in "The People of the Black Circle" is what he's going to decide about this woman he's attracted to – help her regain her political power or keep her as a partner? Because accomplishing both is impossible. We know Elric has this amazing demonic sword, but the point in **STORMBRINGER** is why he would defy the demon Arioach, who not only makes such power available but also, arguably, loves him. But that form of power and that form of love constitute slavery.

Sword-and-sorcery heroes are all about decisions. In this day and age of explicit internal monologues (thought balloons, really) in fantasy heroes' stories, it's easy to lose sight of the fact that these older heroes decided and did things without all the babble. Identifying and discussing the key decisions of the literary heroes will go a long way to keep the role-playing experience from degenerating into schlock, pastiche, and boredom.



Chapter Three:

THE SETTING

Contrary to fan and gaming dogma, great fantasy does not require elaborate pre-story world building. Yes, the Hyborian Age is a triumph of world-building; so are Nehwon, the Young Kingdoms, Naipon, and so on. And yes, some solid notions had to be in place before the author began writing. But the settings developed over the course of time, as stories were written and the hero's own history grew around it a world as big, colorful, intense, and fascinating as he or she. I will go even farther and suggest that the pre-story attention shown to the world and its map found in so much modern fantasy fiction and gaming has actually stunted the development of awesome fantasy storytelling.

So where does this leave the players and the game master in *SORCERER AND SWORD*? It means that world-making is both long-term and collaborative, as the hero wears and even generates the world, rather than merely traipses around in it. It begins relatively sketchy and has to develop over time, with all

Atlantis is only a name for the forgotten memories of mankind.

Lemuria is another such name, and Gondwanaland, Masma, Pohjola, Aluminor, as well. ...

There is no proof, it becomes only an exercise of the imagination.

—G.F. Fox, Introduction to *Kyrík the Mighty*

participants knowledgeable about their roles in the process. This chapter concerns the starting point, not the final result.

THE BASICS

Of course, one doesn't start with a hero out of absolutely nothing. The very first step is of course to get some kind of world together in everyone's mind. Here are some of the conventions of the literary genre that might apply.

What's it like?

A raw age, a wolf age, a time of glittering civilizations built on ruins and yet doomed, either because we know it passes to give way to our own history, or because of impending disaster. It's not quite an age of myth; gods do not walk the Earth and men are concerned with commerce and power; but the echoes of Great Chaos are receding, or perhaps approaching. The people there think their world is normal, but we look upon it with awe, horror, and a fair amount of envy. Here are some conventions of such an age.

- ▼ It is a semi-historical "normal"-kingdoms setting superimposed on What Has Gone Before, which includes one fallen human civilization already.
- ▼ Borders, governing councils, and even technology are a bit anachronistic, i.e. appropriate to more familiar historical ages. The setting doesn't really make sense in the context of real recorded history.
- ▼ The setting is unconcerned with principle-based law, civil rights, and "progress" of any kind. No one has a single thought about being socially constructive in a large sense.
- ▼ The peoples include extremely non-politically-correct racial distinctions; perhaps not supported by the author, but taken as given by the inhabitants. It is a racist, judgmental time. Similarly, gender matters, and women have it rough, although, as in Victorian times, many find ways to buck the system.
- ▼ There are no colorful, cute, or quaint non-human hominid species (cat-people, grumpy dwarves, etc). If any non-humans exist, they are usually very human-like or so monstrous as to count as demons. As a side note, I might go so far as to suggest that the "elf" and "dwarf" types permit modern fantasy authors to address issues that the pulp writers addressed using human races.

Where and when?

Anywhere and anywhen, so long as it's almost or completely disconnected from our own culture and known geography. The range is actually quite broad:

- ▼ Ancient past or far, far future
- ▼ Here on earth or on a distant planet
- ▼ Another reality altogether
- ▼ Deliberately unspecified

Nearly all of the authors listed in Chapter 2 were very careful to divorce their work from any kind of historical fiction.

Of course, "Nehwon" is "No-when" spelled backwards.

To reiterate an earlier point: none of these fantasy worlds were mapped until years and years after the stories appeared! In fact, even the quotes on this page were written well after the stories themselves.

The diversity of possible settings is much more wide open than one might think from the modern literature. Lankhmar and the fantasy version of North Africa that Cyrion roams are highly urbanized, Naipon and Joiry are almost wholly historical-medieval, and Hyboria or the pre-historic civilizations where Kane wanders mix nearly modern cities with utter barbarism. Again: there is no "one way" to set up a fantasy setting, and the role-playing group, in its creative efforts, may fling both Realism and the literary canon to the winds.

Maps

I'll be the first to admit that maps of fantasy settings are ultimately cool. And as role-playing is a group activity, it's not realistic to expect the group to accept "no map at all" as a starting point. The best bet is to begin with a map that offers just enough information to be intriguing, but still has plenty of scope for further creation, both in details of existing features as well as in whole unknown areas.

The plan, of course, is to fill in those details and blank areas through play, adventure by adventure.

It's probably going to be quite an effort for many GMS, used to developing

Sundered from us by gulfs of time
and stranger dimensions dreams
the ancient world of Nehwon with
its towers and skulls and jewels,
its swords and sorceries.

—F. Leiber, *Swords and Deviltry*

In those days there were oceans
of light and cities in the skies and
wild flying beasts of bronze . . .

The time when the Vadhagh
and the Nadragh, age-old ene-
mies, were dying. The time when
Man, the slave of fear, was emerg-
ing, unaware that much of the ter-
ror he experienced was the result
of nothing else but the fact that
he, himself, had come into exis-
tence.

—M. Moorcock, *The Knight of
Swords*

. . . in a dimension next to ours,
there is a world very much like
Earth. On this world is an island
empire called Naipon . . .

Even Amaterasu the Shining
Goddess was unsure . . . whether
in Naipon the hopes and fears of
Japan coalesced into a different
and stranger reality, or if . . . the
glory and terror of Naipon echoed
through the dreams of the
Japanese.

—J. A. Salmonson, *Tomoe Gozen*

or reading detailed, exciting maps, to keep things minimal. However, the pay-off is huge – the development of the most powerful setting you can imagine (literally), through the shared authorship among the entire role-playing group.



ATMOSPHERE

Far more important than detailed explanations of where, when, and indeed what constitutes the setting for your own sword-and-sorcery, is the thematic context, the value system from which emerges the themes of the stories to be created. Consider which of these two general ideas suits you best:

- ▼ clean elemental gusto, where you can call it like you see it and punch anyone who disagrees;
- ▼ drugged swaying decadence, where all is permitted and nothing is valued.

Or go ahead and combine the two, as in Moorcock's stories. Either way, though, the idea is that a hero has plenty of room to stretch and flex his per-

sonal influence, and there aren't a lot of complex societal rules at work, at least none that can't be overcome or ignored.

No matter what the setting, the literature contains an element of pure elegy unmatched by anything except maybe Beowulf. It gives the impression that the Marvelous and Horrific are slowly pulling away from the world, that the ancient age of glamour, power, true passion, and honest expression is past. We, the readers (players), can only marvel at what things were like back then, or might be like over there.

The other major element is straight from Lovecraft: the looming presence of Outer Dark horror. Furthermore, the manifest awfulness of the horror is not limited to flashes of insight, glimpses of bizarre angles, and shadowy scratchings in the dark, but rather it leaps straight into your face. The Truly Awful is a lot less shy in the fantastic age, as compared to the present-day setting.

An associated and very important element of this is the concept of the Old Ones, the dreadful inhuman beings that inhabited, quite comfortably, the chaotic and cruel universe as it used to (and perhaps really continues to) exist. They are "alien" in both the extraterrestrial and metaphysical senses; in fact, these two concepts are completely intertwined.

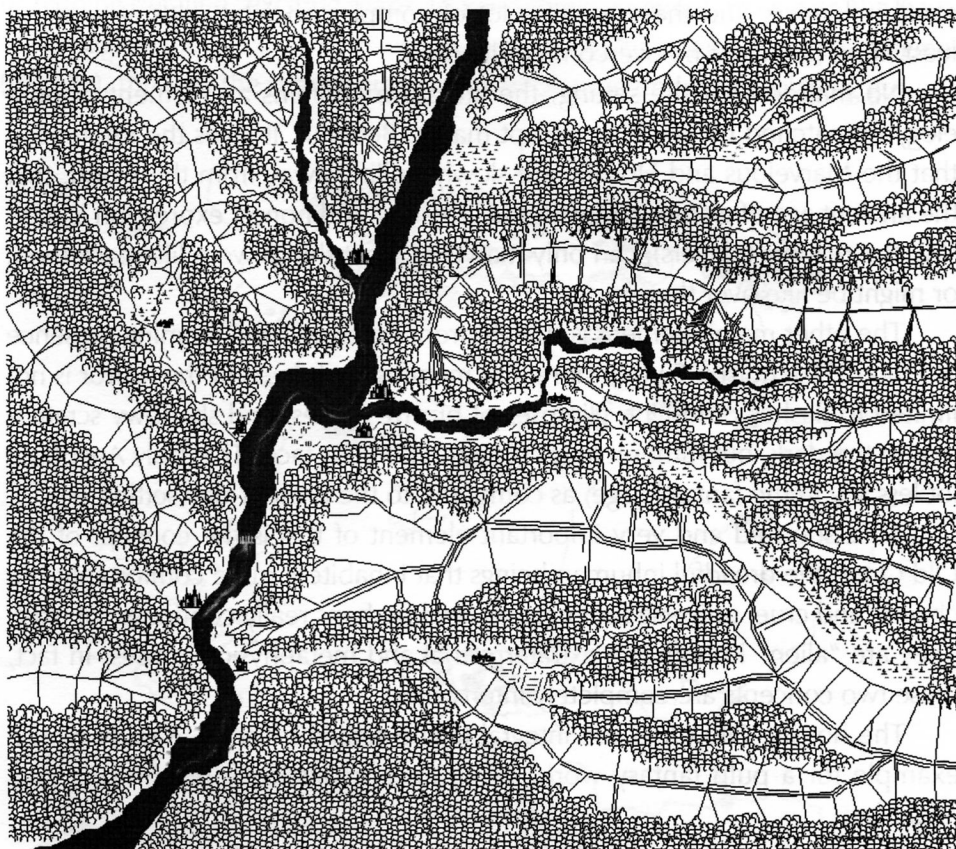
The horrific Old Ones are integral to the setting's history. A fairly typical example for a pulp fantasy world set in an unrealistically pre-historic past might be:

1. the Old Ones reign on Earth
2. war of the Old Ones, with one emerging victorious but weakened
3. rise of man and the first kingdoms
4. human war vs. remaining Old One
5. cataclysm and destruction of the first kingdoms
6. humanity reclaims the world, usually a thriving batch of new races, with a few old human races and remnant Old Ones still around

The above is of course so standard as to be boring, but anything you come up with should be equally quick and have its own relation to the thematic principles of the source literature.

WELCOME TO XAR

Xar is the setting for fierce, exotic, erotic fantasy and adventure. There are teeming masses of people living by ancient traditions in stone cities; they interact with deadly politeness and hot-blooded recklessness. Quick wits, bold deeds, and zesty adventure is the stuff of heroics here. Magic is fun, wild, and colorful, with urbane, surrealistic demons. It's a land of feathered serpents, clashing castanets, and sultry, intelligent, gorgeous women.



The Black Forest

BEWARE THE BLACK FOREST

Imagine small villages scattered across the countryside, bastions of bourgeois comfort, the best little places to live. Straight out of the middle Renaissance. But to get from safe little valley to safe little valley, the traveler must follow the paths through the Forest, which is far larger, older, and much more wise in its way than any human community. This is a setting for harrowing, symbolic adventures involving horrid animorphic demons, weird old wise women, and wicked-faced Faerie folk. It's a toss-up which is more dangerous: a crouching, grinning goblin or a bland smile on the face of the village butcher.

THE CLICKING SANDS

Here is a grim wasteland of shining white sands, glazed and cracked surfaces, oil-coated waterways, dense and colorful vegetation, and the skeletal remains of ruined cities. This is the far, far, far future, such that the inhabitants don't even think of their post-apocalyptic, blasted home as anything except perfectly natural. Of course every fourth birth is a monster (demon).

Of course the whispery voices in the metal demons offer odd, highly-interpretable advice. It's a setting of fearsome daily threats, lots of violence, and plenty of room for discovering the past without understanding it well. The point is that people might mourn the heroism and lost greatness of the past, without ever realizing that they exceed their ancestors in heroism by far, and that we, in contrast, would admire them.

Don't sweat it

Realism, as found in many role-playing game designs, plays very, very little role in sword-and-sorcery fiction, at least insofar as daily life and routines are concerned. Playing Sorcerer and Sword should follow the fiction's model, not the precedents or assumptions of other games.

Therefore, a GM should feel no need to catalogue exact exchange rates and the costs of riverboat travel and how many oats a donkey needs a day. Money, prices, lodgings, travel, and so on only matter when there is some kind of time constraint going on in the story. Otherwise, the character is (1) broke, (2) doing all right for his or her present needs, or (3) rolling in privilege. That's it! Make up a fun or dismissive name for the unit of exchange – hell, I don't remember any other designation in the Conan stories beyond "coins" – and no other financial logistics need apply.

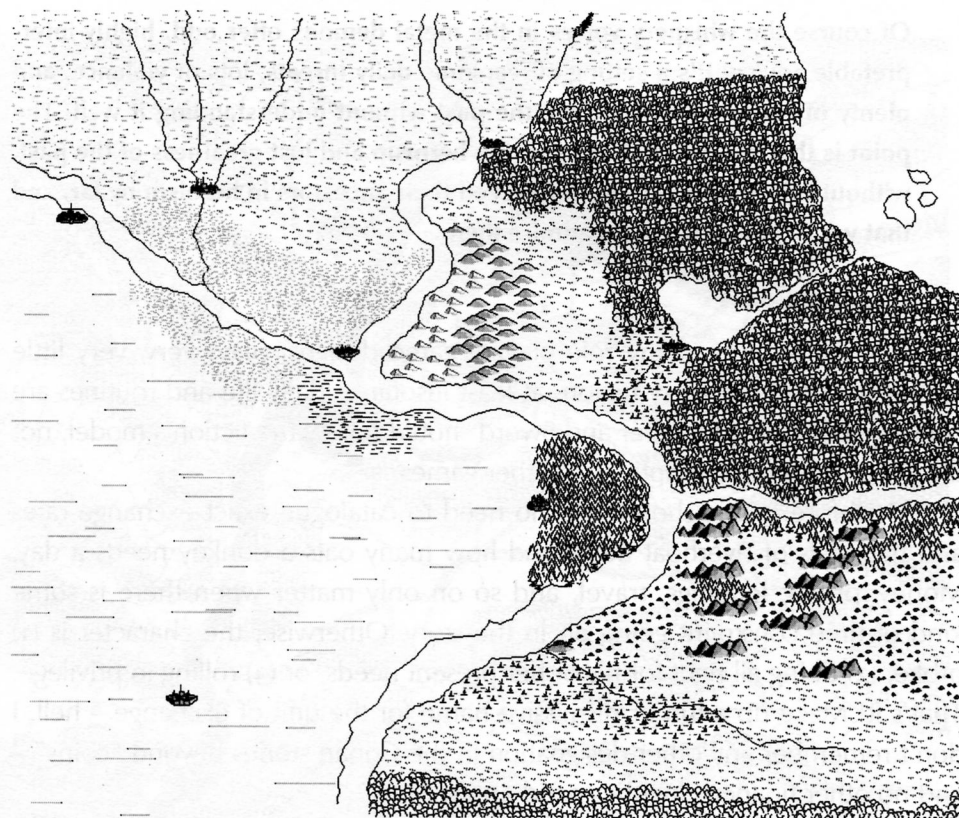
There may come a time during play, however, when "can I buy this" questions arise. They may be resolved by any of the following, depending on the circumstances:

- ▼ Past vs. Will or Past, if the social role remains appropriate in the current situation
- ▼ Will vs. Will or Past
- ▼ Humanity vs. Will, for purposes of gaining charity or aid
- ▼ Drama-only mechanics, that is, agreed-upon assertions between GM and player

If the roll is successful (or the assertions seem reasonable to all concerned), then the character is determined to have provided whatever coinage or equivalent to get the service. Of course, the more extensive the service or object being provided, the more opposition dice should be involved.

A related point is that no one goes shopping for equipment in this genre. There are no "armor and weapons stores" with racks of helmets and suits of mail. Equipment is strictly a matter of current profession, as suggested by Past. A little individualizing may be added for taste, but counting one's shekels or whatever for this purpose is a 1970s gaming holdover that, as far as I'm concerned, can expire instantly at no loss to anyone.

In fact, most of the characters' possessions are recommended to be cus-



The Clicking Sands

tomized to the particular scenario or adventure at the outset of each one. See Chapter 7 for guidelines about equipping characters for play.

MYSTIC OTHERWORLDS

The setting may include an edges-of-reality kind of existence, into which heroes occasionally stumble. However, it is never the alternate-world dimension standard which has become practically de rigeur in modern fantasy fiction. In fact, in this genre, an otherworldly realm exists primarily in psychological terms; it is not only the edge of map-able reality, but the edge of the psyche, of reason, and of cosmic laws. It might even exist super-imposed on reality, present but imperceptible most of the time.

Examples include Death's kingdom in *Nehwon*, the hell-scapes in *Joiry*, Faerie in *The Broken Sword*, the horrific sub-worlds in *Nifft the Lean*, the Underearth in *Night's Master*, Naipon's Buddhist Hell, the pits beneath the Scarlet Citadel, and some of the places Julian wanders into. These places all have common features:

- ▼ To enter, the character or someone else must make a Contact roll, and the

- ritual involved also usually establishes the conditions (spatial or temporal) for getting out.
- ▼ They're hard on Humanity. Upon entering, a character must check Humanity until they lose a point, then they must continue to check, losing more points if they miss the rolls, until they succeed, thus becoming "acclimated." Time between Humanity checks is up to the GM.
 - ▼ They are highly symbolic and surreal, in ways that are distressingly relevant either to character or player. The landscape often conforms to the character's emotional state. This concept should be linked carefully to the Humanity check mechanics. Furthermore, psychology and geography are deliberately confounded; Nehwon might be fully mapped, but Death's kingdom is not on there, yet it can be reached by travelling on horseback in the right state of mind or under the right spell.
 - ▼ They are demon-haunted; however, the demons are in most cases not "at home", there's just a lot of them around. Summoning and Banishing don't work there.

THE XAR VERSION

Xar adventures focus mainly on exotic, sexy circumstances, so these areas are less scary than simply intense. They are the little "pocket dimensions" a high-Power Immanent demon inhabits if it's not Summoned, so a Contact actually peers into them. Their properties and Humanity mechanics should involve triggers and symbols of a specific passion. In fact, depending on how out-of-control the game group wants to get, some of the more adolescent visuals by Richard Corben (e.g. *THE BODYSEY*) might be appropriate. Or not.

THE BLACK FOREST VERSION

Well obviously, this would be the deep and secret places of the forest itself, with all the weight of "Don't leave the path" found in such stories as *THE WIND IN THE WILLOWS* or the Narnia books. The GM thinks about the mysterious Ryhope Wood in Robert Holdstock's *THE BONE FOREST* and *MYTHAGO WOOD*, where deep-buried symbols of the universal subconscious lie in wait for the unwary. It would make a lot of sense for a given area to be perfectly mundane some of the time, and yet horrifically bizarre at other times.

THE CLICKING SANDS VERSION

Here, certainly, the scary-magic places have to be the ruined structures left over by the Ancients, which to most people are simply very, very dangerous hell-pockets. Good model might be the underground city in *BENEATH THE*

PLANET OF THE APES, or the home of the reawakened ancients in **WITHERWING**, but in both cases given a sharp twist to the supernatural and surreal. Here, Humanity loss might involve realizations that these things are in fact made by people, with some insights into the lives they led or the things they did with one another. However, as with everything in this setting, the point is not actually to get a clear picture of the past, but to generate heroic behavior out of the characters' MIS-understandings.



Chapter Four:

THE HERO

SORCERER AND SWORD generates character-driven stories. Now it is time to create Your Hero, the person who exemplifies exactly how you'd like to deal with things. Or perhaps, who in dealing with them well or badly expresses exactly what you feel about certain issues. By "hero," I do not mean "paragon of virtue," but rather "battler against things." What are the sources of great conflict, and the means to cope with them? Love and sex? Honesty? Wits? Humor? Moral assurance? Violence? Power? The choice must be yours.

The main characters of pulp adventure fantasy are a tremendously mixed bag of approaches to life, skills, degree of sorcerous training and activity, and all sorts of other variables. There are intellectuals (Elric, Cyrion), bounders (the Gray Mouser), bad-asses (Kane, Tomoe Gozen), gritty survivors (Mael, Jirel), and even goofballs (Myal Lemyal). There's no reason not to reflect or

One of the newcomers was a man, misshaped with a huge hump to his back and a crouch to his stance. Shaggy hair hung below his shoulders and his wide gash of a mouth was rimmed with bulging purple lips through which a forked tongue showed as it ran about his mouth. He wore filthy rags, but the eyes that peered out of that grotesquerie of a face were bright and intelligent.

Beside this human travesty stood a woman, garbed in black hood and robe so that only her face and sandalled feet showed. Kothar stared into her face, seeing a sultry beauty, dusky skin, and large eyes in which the black pupils seemed coals out of hell.

—G. F. Fox, Kothar and the Demon Queen

even to expand on this variety, and the player of **SORCERER AND SWORD** is strongly encouraged to do so.

However, heroes for this sort of story are not constructed solely of game mechanics. A character could be made following all the numerical guidelines in all these chapters and still be **lame!** And his story will be lame too, if there's no heart to it, and if no one really cares what this character does.

THE XAR HERO

"You know what I want?" says a player. "I want my guy to be really cool. And not because he's more muscular than everyone, but because he understands things they don't. Like Cyrion, when he figures out that the big toothy monster isn't the demon after all, and can turn the tables on the real demon because he's figured him out."

Discussion clarifies things a little: the player wants a slim, arrogant male character, very fast at swordplay, knowledgeable and swift on the uptake, good at dealing with demons as well as with people. Kind of a snakey or cat-like type of character. If someone tries to mess him over, he turns the tables.

"No angst!" insists the player. "I'm tired of all these characters whining about their problems. This guy meets the world on its own terms and gets laid a lot. He's totally cool." The GM keeps his thoughts regarding wish-fulfillment to himself and starts looking over the numbers.

THE BLACK FOREST HERO

"You know what always gets me about those fairy tales?" says a player. "The kids are always victims. I want to play a kid character, a little girl, who's just as scary as the ogres and witches."

Discussion leads to the idea of a changeling, brought up by weird Faerie creatures, recently returned to life among her people. Of course, she can call on her old friends, who like her but are very unpredictable.

"It's all about Innocence," continues the player. "This girl isn't corrupted by the Evil in the forest. Although she's practically raised in it, and its mark is on her forever, her soul is still her own." The GM thinks this character represents even scarier psychology than the first one, but that's what **SORCERER'S** all about, right? "What ever happened to nice games like **BUNNIES AND BURROWS**," he wonders.

THE CLICKING SANDS HERO

"All right, I want the guy who rides in out of the desert on a big scary monster." A player holds up every piece of art by Moebius and sundry other

Heavy Metal references. "See? The metal breath-mask, the robes, the whole expert survivor gig." He also details the creature as some kind of big bear-cat mutant thing.

Discussion leads to a better concept than the "man who cares about nothing," as the player decides that the hero has been touched with horrible insight by delving into the lairs of the ruined Ancients, and that he needs apply his knowledge in some positive way. To do this, he'll need help and perhaps forge some human bonds with others.

The player also clarifies that he wants plenty of scenes with naked, savage mutants attacking en masse, and that the hero might be depicted as hacking them apart as some of the horde gnaws on his legs. "Ick," says the GM, and the player grins.

Compensation is a small price to pay for commitment. Sword-and-sorcery heroes certainly fulfil a need in their authors (by extension, players, in an RPG context), and much might be made of the psychology of an author who scribbles incessantly about a larger-than-life, utterly physically and sorcerously competent hero. I suggest that the beginning of character creation should exploit this effect to the hilt.

However, such character-identification, especially in its wish-fulfilment form, is not sufficient. By itself it is not a particularly admirable or interesting act. Therefore, a player-character is not a finished product, but merely a means by which heroic stories are created. For this to work, the player's intensity and commitment to the character must be transferred to the other members of the group, such that they "feel" the protagonist role of that character as well. If the GM's job is to facilitate the player's authorship, the player's job is to interest and captivate an audience, which in this case would be the other players.

Those heroic names

Conan, Elric, Skafloc, Tomoe, Owen, Kane ... what great names, eh? Upon reflection, yet another dramatic difference between the great heroes of sword-and-sorcery fiction and their pallid heirs appears: the former tend to have real names. Not made-up conglomerates of syllables and sounds, but actual human names, archaic to be sure, but applied to someone once upon a time as a perfectly normal identifier.

It's not a hard-and-fast rule. Cyrion, Rajan, and Fafhrd aren't real names. But they sound as if they could be, as they lack the de-gendered, de-cultured, "safe" feel of many modern fantasy protagonists' names. As a starting point, consider using a real name for your SORCERER AND SWORD hero. If a better

or really compelling imaginary name occurs to you, great – but start with names that we instantly recognize as such, and work from there.

DESTINY

This is a new thing for Sorcerer characters, but it is so distinctive in the literature that it deserves a game designation. Destiny is optional, and perhaps it may apply only to one of the characters. Some examples from the literature include:

Position

The character will end his or her saga in a specific social role. As the story progresses, the character may develop and change, but it is always in light of the eventual fate known to the gm and player. In fact, it may be that the first few role-playing runs are set late in his life, to establish it! (See Chapter Seven regarding running out-of-sequence sagas.) The classic example is Conan himself, about whom Howard wrote not a word without the character's current or eventual kingly role firmly in mind.

Crux of the conflict

Enormously important metaphysical events hinge on the character's pivotal role, often intertwined with the character's own development and attempts to resolve the same questions on a personal level. Good examples are Elric; who in struggling with his own sense of ethics will make the final decisions regarding Law and Chaos; and Skafloc, who in confronting his changeling "brother" will set the stage for Ragnarok.

Unchanging star

The character has a role or identity in the scheme of things that will never change, regardless of the conflicts thrown at him. He provides catalysis and commentary in the face of surrounding events, and moves on. The best examples are Kane, cursed by a god, or God, to remain unchanged; Cyrion, unflappable, objective, and remote as a star; and Tomoe Gozen, who shift as she might through social roles, continues to react and behave as herself, for better or worse.

If Destiny is involved in a Sorcerer and Sword story (and it does not have to be), the players must be good at separating themselves from the characters on occasion. Destiny is strictly a concern of the player and the gm, not of the character's own awareness. For example, a character who considers himself guided by a prophecy does not have to be played using Destiny, and a character played using Destiny does not have to have any inkling of it.

DESCRIPTIONS

These replace the descriptions in the base Sorcerer rules. Again, scores over 4 are permitted two descriptions, if desired.

Stamina

- ▼ **Savage-raised.** This applies well not only to combat but also to many situations in which smell, hearing, and “sixth sense” are useful, not to mention climbing, swimming, and so on. A versatile description.
- ▼ **Trained soldier.** Good with all weapons, used to the travails and conduct of war and soldiery. Note that unarmed combat skills are very basic, limited to punching and rough-and-tumble grappling.
- ▼ **Big and vigorous.** Speaks for itself: you’re a big person.
- ▼ **Just healthy** (recommended Stamina = 2 or 3). This is for characters who are not physically special in any way.
- ▼ **Arcane regimen.** This is what classical sorcerers do to stay in shape: funny breathing, stretching, calisthenics, controlled diet, and so on. It may well include martial arts training.
- ▼ **Unnatural means.** Bathe in virgin lamb blood, run around naked in the moonlight, recite poetry in the shadow of the Frog God . . . this sort of thing seems to work for some people.

Will

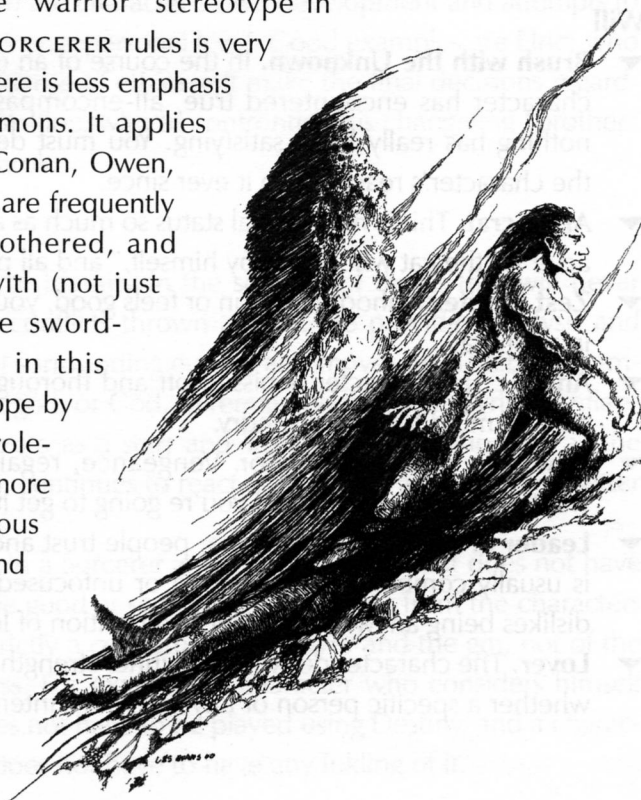
- ▼ **Brush with the Unknown.** In the course of an otherwise normal life, the character has encountered true, all-encompassing insight. Ever since, nothing has really been satisfying. You must define the experience and the character’s reactions to it ever since.
- ▼ **Aristocrat.** This is not a social status so much as a state of mind. The character is “the cat who walks by himself,” and all places are alike to him.
- ▼ **Zest for life.** Wahoo! If it’s fun or feels good, you go for it. If it doesn’t, it’s in your way.
- ▼ **Angry.** The character is pissed off and thoroughly ready to express this state of mind to all and sundry.
- ▼ **Vow.** The classic motivator. Vengeance, regaining property or status, whatever – you want it and you’re going to get it.
- ▼ **Leader of men.** Basic charisma; people trust and respect the character. It is usually combined with focused or unfocused ambition; the character dislikes being anywhere except in a position of leadership.
- ▼ **Lover.** The character derives great inner strength from the love of another, whether a specific person or anyone who’s interested today.

Lore

- ▼ **Changeling.** (Lore 2+) You were raised by Old Ones or Demons and know their ways well. Now you live in the “normal” world; perhaps you are a bit unsure of yourself there.
- ▼ **Half-breed.** (Lore 2+) One of your parents is an Old One, Demon, or **Undead**. You are by no means a normal human being (see Humanity below and Chapter 6).
- ▼ **Inhuman.** (Lore 3+) Not as bad as it sounds: you are one of the few descendants of a previous version of humans, quite similar to the current ones. You may well have a connection to or understanding of the Old Ones.
- ▼ **Adept.** (Lore 5+) The classic human expert sorcerer. Quite impressive.
- ▼ **Apprentice.** (Lore 2+) Gonna be an adept some day!
- ▼ **Naïve** (Lore 1–2). Naïvete takes on an entirely new meaning in this setting, perhaps surprising for those who are used to a fighter vs. wizard dichotomy. These characters don’t consider themselves sorcerers, but the demons do. The major differences from the “naïve” definition in **SORCERER** are that in this setting, (1) they are performing sorcery “blind” and know very few, if any, actual rituals; and (2) they might not begin play with a Bound demon.

Regarding Naïvete, the “warrior” stereotype in Chapter 2 of the base **SORCERER** rules is very similar, although here there is less emphasis on go-and-hunt-the-demons. It applies well to Tomoe Gozen, Conan, Owen, and others, all of whom are frequently haunted, consulted, bothered, and otherwise interacting with (not just killing) demons. These sword-wielding butt-kickers, in this branch of fiction and I hope by the parameters of this role-playing game, have far more in common with sorcerous protagonists like Kane and Elric than they do with the traditional role-playing fighter character.

In fact, the primary source material offers



an astonishing lesson. Conan, as written by Howard, does not conform to the “fighter class” common in fantasy role-playing. For one thing, the often-repeated stereotype that he is scared of magic is totally inaccurate. For another, there are many instances of Conan interacting with demons that perfectly accord with protagonist activities in a typical game of *Sorcerer*, including:

- ▼ Banishing (Khosatral Khel in “The Devil in Iron”, the dog-demon in “The Phoenix on the Sword”, the assassin-demon in “The Black Stranger”)
- ▼ Summoning (Belit’s ghost scene in “Queen of the Black Coast”)
- ▼ Commanding (the mummy in “The Hour of the Dragon”)
- ▼ Binding (Yag-kosha of Yag in “The Tower of the Elephant”)

In game terms, Conan is a sorcerer!

Past

(replaces “Cover” in the base rules)

- ▼ **Immortal.** The character does not age rapidly or at all, and has lived at least a few centuries of life so far, perhaps much more. They have any and all skills they need, using Past dice – except for entirely novel ones, which are pathetic at Past = 1.
- ▼ **Social rank.** Similar to the concept in *SORCERER*: what the character does or did for a socially-legitimate living, especially if it plays a strong role in his or her self-image. It can be anywhere up and down the social scale. In this genre there are two extremely common versions:
 - Civilized, in which case an actual title should be included: the Gray Priest of Bab, second captain of the Red Guard, princess of Kozala, etc.
 - Barbaric, meaning the character is (and currently lives as) a nomad or tribesman somewhere in the boonies. Again, some indicator of role should be included: shaman, outrider, hunter, etc. Do not confuse Barbaric Past with Savage Upbringing.
- ▼ **Outlaw.** Similar to Social Rank, above, except that the activities involved are not societally-approved. E.g. pirate, bandit, thief. (The thieves in Lankhmar, however, would be a social rank, not outlawry.)

Unlike the base rules, in this setting, a character can accumulate Pasts if it seems reasonable, especially over the course of many adventures. For example, Elric in *Stormbringer* is Noble + Outlaw, Conan in “The Hour of the Dragon” is Barbarian + Nomad + Pirate + Soldier + King. This works whether stories are played in or out of chronological sequence, but the mechanics differ slightly; see Chapter 7 for suggestions on how this might be done.

Price

(renamed “Flaw” for Naïve characters)

The usual array of personal problems such as those suggested in Sorcerer are available for characters in this setting as well. The following are some of the more common from the pulp literature.

- ▼ **Uncivilized.** The character is from a really far-away place and obviously doesn’t fit it. He or she is not mean, stupid, or even rude – just unconcerned with local ritual.
- ▼ **Unlucky in love.** This one is fun: it acts as a bonus in establishing a relationship, but as a penalty when dealing with anything that threatens it. Combine with Will: Lover to get a seriously messed-up PC.
- ▼ **Idealistic/gullible.** How come Elric keeps listening to each Cosmic Hoo-ha who gives him “the real scoop” this time?
- ▼ **Bad reputation.** Usually based on a specific event in the character’s history.
- ▼ **Demonic feature.** Either a scary physical feature or an actual Need, just like a demon. This one goes well with Lore: Half-breed.

Kickers

Kickers play a unique role in Sorcerer and Sword. Functionally, they are the same as in the base rules – a circumstance that propels the character into making decisions. However, as adventures in this genre do not necessarily occur chronologically, and as the character is not built linearly from adventure to adventure as in most role-playing games, the Kicker needs to be built very locally. That is, it applies to a specific adventure, in a specific time and place for the character. See Chapter Seven for a discussion of the agreements and choices necessary to prepare for play, and for how Kickers fit into it.

Female heroes

These are few and unhappy in the strictly sword-and-sorcery literature (all the modern fantasy swordswomen with big hair and 80s attitudes are not relevant here). Were I bold, “female” could conceivably fall as a description under Will, insofar as a female character of note in this genre must necessarily have used her marginalized sex as a psychological spur for achievement, and succeeded beyond any imaginable equivalent among male characters.

Tomoe Gozen is the standout female

Were she in rancour to slay every person in Kabai, to demand the attention of the cosmos to her crimes, still it would be but a gesture of outraged futility . . .

They [she and her lovers] were all three dead, and Life hated them, and the gods hated them, and each one hated the other. Nidyis realized that her soul was ancient and exhausted, and it desired to die . . .

—D.C. Smith, *The Sorcerer’s Shadow*

hero of this genre, although Teres from *Bloodstone* is a good character too. Jirel takes solid 2-dimensional second place. But they are all so depressing! Tomoe's saga concerns the "road to hell," and she eventually takes Neroyume ("sleeping in hell") as her name. Jirel kills the love of her life in practically the very first story written about her.

The main role for female characters, though, seems to be the villain, often of the spiteful, arrested-adolescent variety. Rarely are they heard as voices in their own right, and when they are, they are uniformly mournful and bitter.

Other branches of fantasy, both old and new, offer more variety. I hope that new sorts of female heroes and villains might arise for the specific brand of sorcerous-adventure fantasy treated here, neither sex-sublimated violence addicts like Jirel, angst-ridden teen rebels like Zorayas, nor anything else that is so ultimately depressing. Lots of available room has barely been explored, with Salmonson's two *Amazons* collections offering the best examples so far.

... [Sibele] felt as if the deep blue sky were empty, the slim birches and the willows meaningless, the sun cast no real warmth, and worst of all her own bright beauty was worthless, less than hollow. At the same time she felt as if she had always known this: all her life had been a delusion that she had practiced on herself.

—V. Graham, *The Witchstone*

Time wearied Zorayas. Though she had the face and body of her youth, she felt an old woman, exhausted and bored with the world. It seemed there was nothing she could not do, and nothing indeed she had not done. No enemy could withstand her, no lover deny her, no kingdom defeat her. Perpetual success beat her to her knees . . . She had no love for life, had never truly had any.

—T. Lee, *Night's Master*

HUMANITY

Definitions

Any game of *SORCERER* requires customizing Humanity to the taste and standards of the role-playing group, but here are the general guidelines based on the literature.

In this setting, unlike most modern-day stories, Humanity concerns only close relationships. Murder, robbery, and rapine are only bad (i.e. prompt Humanity loss rolls) insofar as they harm people the hero knows or has shared danger with. A character can be a pretty bad person to everyone else and not need to check Humanity.

Humanity 0, in this setting, means the character has no feeling for others as people at all. They are to be manipulated, killed, and otherwise regarded as things. Whether this is expressed as clinical detachment, black despair, or sybaritic abandon depends on the character; in game terms, as in the base

SORCERER rules, the GM exercises veto power over how the Humanity of a character is role-played.

Some heroes have serious Humanity problems. The literary examples include Kane's lapses into and out of pure detachment, Skafloc's murderous rages, and Elric's, well, you know. Others seem to glide by without any such hassles, like good old Conan, who generally treats his friends and bedmates well in Howard's stories.

Certain fantasy and horror fiction revel in a kind of Gothic angst trip, but SORCERER AND SWORD does not really support this (later-written Elric stories notwithstanding). Even the most tormented protagonists – Kane, Elric (in the earlier-written stories), Skafloc, Tomoe – are never paralyzed with indecision. Although unhappy, they have a certain verve. They don't sulk but act on something even if they are being misguided or less than mature about it.

But the snake was not looking at him. It was glaring over his shoulder at the man called Pelias, who stood with his arms folded, smiling. And in the great, cold, yellow eyes slowly the hate died out to be replaced by an expression of pure fear – the only time Conan ever saw such an expression in a reptile's eyes. With a swirling rush like the sweep of a strong wind, the great snake was gone.

"What did he see to frighten him?" asked Conan, eyeing his comrade uneasily.

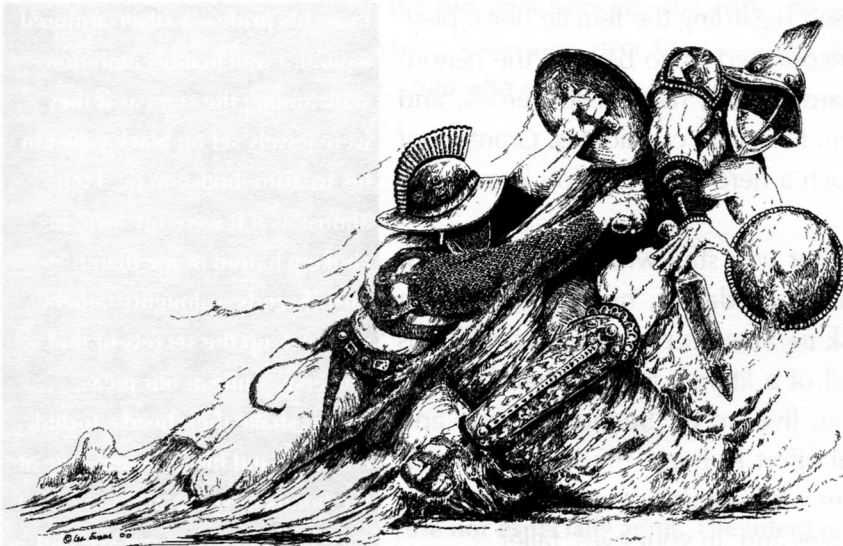
"The scaled people see what escapes the mortal eye," answered Pelias cryptically. "You see my fleshly guise; he saw my naked soul."

—R. E. Howard, *The Scarlet Citadel*

Humanity trading

These are new rules, permitting a character to start with more than 10 points across the three main Scores by decreasing starting Humanity.

- ▼ Given certain Score descriptions (Half-breed, Immortal, Inhuman are good choices, as is Brush with the Unknown), the character may trade down starting Humanity for corresponding increases in scores. Add "inhumanly" to the descriptor of the boosted score(s).
- ▼ One may also establish a number as a Humanity maximum, beyond which it cannot be increased (very good for Inhuman or Half-breed). The stated maximum must be at Humanity's starting value prior to Humanity checks or any other trading. This confers yet another point (only one, regardless of the value of the maximum) for scores. In this case, the character also gets a second Price, called The Chill, meaning that people get the willies around him, providing a penalty to interaction rolls.



OVERVIEW

All right, what's a sorcerer in this genre? Here they are, from the most human to the least.

- ▼ Naïve, with Lore 1 as discussed above. Examples: Conan, Tomoe Gozen. This grades into the next category without a clear boundary.
- ▼ Primarily physical sorts who've been brushed or otherwise highly exposed to the supernatural; always to have one foot in the horrific/magic world, with a little bit of skill there, even if they'd prefer not to practice it. Lore at 1–2. Examples: Skafloc, Owen, Jirel.
- ▼ Human sorcerers, Lore 3+, usually 5+. A very human bunch, often roguish and passionate, having struck a semi-reasonable balance with their art. Examples: Pelias, Gildmirth, Khemsa, Nabonidus, Duhaur, Pyre, Thoth-Amon, the *rokubo* in *Tomoe Gozen*. In the older literature they are never the main protagonist, which seems unfair. I like these guys.
- ▼ Half-breeds, Lore usually 4+, Humanity traded down to 0–2. The worst of the worst, the most horrifically outrageous villains around. Examples: Efrell, Zogar Sag, Echiko, Tsotha-Lanti, Anra Devadoris.
- ▼ Members of an ancient/inhuman race, with Lore at a solid 4 (expert but limited). Even as heroes their emotions are never quite on track with most people's, expressed in game terms as a set Humanity maximum. Examples: Salome, Yara, Tascela, Tolkemec; on the heroic side, Kane, Elric.
- ▼ Undead. Lore 4+. Usually pretty bad, but not as imaginatively awful as the half-breeds. This option isn't immediately available to player-characters, but see Necromancy in the next chapter. Examples: Thugra Khotan, Xaltotun, Korjonos, Narathkor, Kuro.

As discussed regarding the female hero, players are encouraged to go beyond the canon: solid wizard heroes, half-breed heroes, and so on seem like good candidates. Granted, of course, such a hero is hardly, you know, normal.

Whether you stay within the canon or expand its boundaries, hero creation is a major task IN *SORCERER AND SWORD*. This is one hell of a literary tradition, and you've got a lot to live up to. Spend the time and emotional effort to begin the hero-telling for a character who stands just as tall as the literary examples and, in your eyes, taller.

THE XAR HERO: RAZIR AL-ANBA

This fellow was once a serpent, who through a cult's worship of an ancient demon was transformed into a man. The player describes him as a slim, quiet fellow, whose expression is utterly unreadable; this is to say, people read it all the time, but all they perceive are their own expectations and perhaps reflections of themselves. Razir does not have a Destiny, as the player is perfectly happy to let some other character be the saga's chew-toy.

Stamina 5, arcane regimen

Will 4, zest for life

Lore 3, inhuman-ish halfbreed (technically)

Past 4, wandering student

Price -1, easily becomes target of resentment

Humanity 2 (traded down)

Telltale: extreme stillness or blurringly fast motion.

THE BLACK FOREST HERO: ALISETTE

A basic thirteen-year-old, well-behaved girl character from any fairy tale, except that she was raised by the Odd Folk for a while. Now she's vowed to

I saw his pride – a silver-armored wound. I watched his ambition stalk among the stars as if they were jewels set on black velvet in his treasure house to be. I felt, almost as if it were my own, his choking hatred of the bland, miserly gods – almighty fathers who lock up the secrets of the universe, smile at our pleas, frown, shake their heads, forbid, chastise; and his groaning rage at the bonds of space and time, as if each cubit he could not see and tread upon were a silver manacle upon his wrist, as if each moment before or after his own life were a silver crucifying nail. I walked through the gale-blown halls of his loneliness and glimpsed the beauty that he cherished – shadowy, glittering forms that cut the soul like knives – and once I came upon the dungeons of his love, where no light came to show it was corpses that were fondled and bones kissed. I grew familiar with his desires, which demanded a universe of miracles peopled by unveiled gods. And his lust, which quivered at the world as at a woman, frantic to know each secret part.

—F. Leiber, *Adept's Gambit*

re-define and re-establish the old pact between the Folk and an area of human villages, said pact having gone awry over the centuries. To do this, she needs to find the demon child who originally took her place.

Stamina 2, just healthy

Will 4, vow

Lore 4, changeling

Past 4, little girl

Price -1, gets little respect from adults

Humanity 4

Telltale: avoids touching cold iron

Alisette is neither especially cute nor especially adult. The intent is for her to be scary BECAUSE she's a kid, with both the insights and limitations thereof. The player decides that her concept demands the Destiny of Unchanging star.

THE CLICKING SANDS HERO: KABEN12

A grim survivor of the wastes, riding on a mutant creature and never settling down. The model is the benevolent western gunslinger, of course, whose actions aid small communities but never permit him to join them, or which even go terribly wrong. As mentioned before, Kaben12 was vouchsafed unbearable insights from his experiences with an Ancient machine in the old, ruined city.

Stamina 5, trained fighter

Will 3, brush with the Unknown

Lore 2, naïve

Past 5, outrider/scout

Price -1, occasional mild convulsions

Humanity 5

Telltale: radiation scars

The player and GM are both concerned that Kaben12 might be too predictable, so they decide that he has the Destiny Crux of the conflict. The issue at hand is that long-preserved Ancients will be awakened through his deeds, and that his decisions at that time determine whether they stride forth to dominate the world or are destroyed in favor of the current human communities, weak and blighted as they are.



Chapter Five:

SORCERY

Unlike much modern fantasy, in this genre, sorcery is regarded by the common man almost exactly as in the modern-day setting: regular people might be superstitious, but they flatly reject magical acts. To them, they do not live in a “magical world.” In the few settings in which magic is a wee bit more common, still, there is never this idea that you can pay so many gold pieces to get a spell to fix your roof or heal your whooping cough. Magic/sorcery remains a frightening, world-view-destroying thing, well-deservedly.

Sorcerers are feared and hated because they have unpleasant habits and o’erweening ambitions, and certainly because of people’s superstitions, but not because they obviously

“You know the question, don’t deny it, Faliol. The one you dreamed of in the dreams that were not dreams. The Torture of the Question you dreaded to hear asked, and dreaded more to have answered.”

“Demon!”

“What is the face of the soul of the world?”

“It is only a dead face, a face that is not a face.”

“No, Faliol, it is this face,” said the masked figure as it peeled away its mask.

—T. Ligotti, *Masquerade of a*

Dead Sword

summon and command demons. The sorcerous activities are always whispers and rumors, not knowledge.

Furthermore, in most of the source literature, God or the gods are conspicuously absent no matter how fervently they are worshipped or how often they are mentioned. Even if there are great big cosmic beings, their connection to human religion and ethics is often deliberately discounted. In this sense, 1930s pulp fantasy is aggressively modern literature.

DEMONS

The word “demon” in this genre refers to a very broad range of beings and creatures. The following categories are independent of Type from the base rules, so a “demon” must now be described not only by Type but also by one of these.

Immanents

These beings are not Summoned or Banished; they are already here. They may be Contacted, which may be considered a magical “Call” to them where they lurk or sleep. In many cases, such a Contact involves a highly specific ritual and may even require being at a certain place, or at a certain time, or both.

Beast (recommended Power: 4–8). Prehistoric beasts of disturbing intelligence. In modern times, they’re not really magical, but in terms of this genre, which deliberately confounds “ancient” with “unnatural,” they are figures of horror. They may Pact (see below), usually for simple things (“eat this sacrificial victim, OK?”) but cannot be Bound.

Pagan Thing (recommended Power: 2–5). Minor-magical creatures that used to be native during the days of the Old Ones, but now huddle or skulk in out-of-the-way places. They may be more or less common depending on how fantastical the setting is. Like Beasts, they will Pact but cannot be Bound.

Old Ones (recommended Power: 8+). As far as a human perspective is concerned, these are similar to True demons and Binding is certainly possible. They come in specific sub-categories.

- ▼ Vicious and solitary, solacing itself on human flesh or evil plots. It might be:
 - sulking in its lair, perhaps feeding off decadent humans. These are real bastards, with Taint at Range, they’re so bad. They tend not to Pact or Bind, just feed and otherwise cause havoc when messed with.

- awaiting its opportunity. These are certainly capable of Bindings and Pacts; most of them like them very much (although boy do they cheat), and are very dangerous once active (here we have the title characters in *Stormbringer* and *Bloodstone*).
- ▼ Fairly decent loner, dreaming of days past. Approach correctly, it will abide by the courtesies of the old days, or act upon individual likes and dislikes.
- ▼ Horrid, malign community. They might be:
 - smart ones, too mean and weird to deal with safely;
 - dumb and vicious, degenerate and minor in the big scheme of things, and probably worth a Taint because they're upsetting to see or touch.

True demons

These pretty much follow straight Sorcerer guidelines, in two categories worth considering.

- ▼ Kind of dumb, the basic “feed me an arm and point me at a foe, or use the Power I can give you.”
- ▼ Demon Lords, equal to the greatest Old Ones in their power and significance. The only difference really is that these demons have a primarily metaphysical, not physical existence.

For True demons, use SORCERER rituals and rules in their entirety and add Pact as well.

Undead

Ghosts, liches, hungry cadavers, and lots more. Undead are not that different from True demons in strictly game terms, and all the Sorcerer rituals apply in their entirety. Some additions or modifications might include:

- ▼ Add the possible Desire “Final rest,” that is, the Undead would really like to die the final death.
- ▼ Undead do not lose Power from being Unbound; i.e., they are Immanents.
- ▼ They do lose Power, following the same rules as Binding, if the Token (see below) is destroyed or converted into something else. The GM may consider the rate for this loss to be measured in hours, minutes, or seconds, instead of days.

Animated corpses. Unlike splatter-movie zombies, these characters always have some semblance of consciousness, usually indicating that some kind of personal torment is involved. Simple automaton-type animated corpses are not very common in the literature.

Self-re-animated lichs. A resurrected or preserved self and body past the boundary of death. These are sorcerers that have crossed the line and are now subject to the rules regarding demons.

Ghosts. Emotional-psycho, symbolic, and highly unreasonable beings. The circumstances of their Contact and Summoning are usually very specific and they cannot be Bound.

Some GMS might be interested in werewolves and vampires. It is entirely off-genre to treat these concepts as species or any sort of natural or racial phenomenon. There are much more effective ways to get them into the story.

- ▼ True demon or Old One with the relevant attributes
- ▼ Pagan Thing (this is closest to gothic literature)
- ▼ Person with demon Parasite
- ▼ Non-demon user/target of Shapeshift (i.e. cursed)

Demon desires

So what are demons up to? The list of Desires should be customized by the individual role-playing group, but these are the most common from the literature.

- ▼ Community. This might be to establish a group or to protect an already-existing one.
- ▼ To worship. Smaller demons may well want to further the aims of a Demon Lord, or some Pagan Things may be just as religious, probably toward an Old One, as people can be.
- ▼ To be worshipped. Who wouldn't enjoy this?
- ▼ Conquest. Tried and true!
- ▼ Corruption. Tried and true #2!
- ▼ Ruin. Like Corruption, only more generalized, focused on larger communities or issues. A favorite of Object Demons in the form of swords.
- ▼ Deliberately incomprehensible. This might be considered the Lovecraft option, in which the very fact that it's unspeakably weird is what makes it scary.

XAR DEMONICS

The key to Xar demons is class. They are beautiful, strange, and terrifying. If one were to rate a province of Xar by religion, the center of the continent would be "blue" or monotheistic, with various shades of magenta or lavender to indicate the presence of older, animistic or demon-worshipping cultures, and with only a few scattered, far-flung provinces being crimson.

The animistic demons' Desires might range from sybaritic to being wor-

shipped. They would accord with the rules for Pagan Things, usually but not always Immanents.

To add just a little crawling, menacing horror to the Xar picture, there is also a completely different type available: the Possessors of dead bodies, with really straightforward Desires and Need. They are True demons, who are conjured out of Nowhere using blasphemous mockeries of the monotheistic religion. It also seems reasonable to include hooded cultists who worship them and abet their atrocious activities.

Razir's demon Nafhar is a killer-hawk thing. It is the result of a curse to kill him, but he turned it around by getting into terrible trouble, forcing the demon to save him in order to be the one who kills him later. It hunts him, but he is clever enough to twist circumstances into ways that benefit him. In game terms, they are Bound although neither really thinks of it that way.

Type: Passer (hawk)

Stamina 5, Will 6, Lore 5, Power 6

Abilities: Travel, Special Damage (lethal, talons), Link,

Desire: Ruin, Need: mate with female birds, Telltale: actual bronze scales and claws



BLACK FOREST DEMONICS

The emphasis here is on the truly scary, things and situations that will really make the players shudder. But it's not so much Summoning as the horrific reality, in that the demons are really, actually, here. Just off the path, or under your bed.

So they might include Pagan Things like goblins/faeries, little ugly impish sorts with a mysterious Queen. Their Desire would usually be mischief, and they have Needs that everyone understands through folklore (singing old rhymes, bowls of milk, etc). A totally different sort of demon would include the really awful animal-people that lead people into evil ways (Desires = corruption, ruin). They are not a race! Each is unique, like Old Man Raven or the Wolf at the Door.

And not to forget the Undead ghost stuff: curses, vendettas, horrific manifestations of all sorts. In many ways these might be like the Psyche demons from the base **SORCERER** rules, with the emphasis being sudden visions, bizarre events, and obscure symbols. The True demon rules would apply to them.

Alisette's demon is Griblet, an imp friend of hers that came to the mundane lands to watch over her, sometimes to her distress as she tries to live a normal life.

Type: Inconspicuous

Stamina 3, Will 4, Lore 3, Power 4

Abilities Craft, Cloak, Warp

Desire: Mischief, Need: milk, Telltale: leaves claw marks in things

CLICKING SANDS DEMONICS

Here, we're talking about grotesque and disturbing, with a strong twist to the science-fantasy dial. Demon concepts include mutant monsters, which would certainly be Immanents of one sort or another. The setting doesn't absolutely require that demons be covert, so "Passing" would come in two sorts: really Passing, that is, easily mistaken for human or non-demonic mutant; and just plain there.

Another sort of demonics would be far more subtle: the role and influence of ancient devices that have any sort of volition or communicative abilities. The most obvious might be still-functional computers with either full-AI capacity or what only seems to be intelligent output. Treating these as True demons in terms of the rules works very well, although it takes a bit of mental gymnastics.

Kaben12's demon is the monster Beast he rides, a mutant creature from the wastes. It's much like a big bear or cat thing, with reptilian features in its tail, paws, and face.

Stamina 6, Will 7, Lore 6, Power 7

Type: "Passer" as above, that is, it's basically a big obvious monster

Desire: Competition (dislikes other demons), Need: doses of radiation,

Telltale: occasionally speaks a word or phrase

Abilities: Big, Travel, Transport, Vitality, Special Damage (lethal, poison bite),

Perception (dangerous levels of radiation)

SORCERY ITSELF

The GM and players have a lot of freedom in deciding just how much of the story is going to concern direct interactions with demons (of whatever sort). For some settings and heroes, most of the sorcery has already occurred by the time the hero shows up at all. In others, it is almost a daily concern. Either way, though, I recommend you avoid the modern-fantasy image in which practical, game-balanced spells are tossed around left and right. In this genre, a little sorcery goes a long way.

The pact

Pacting is a sub-category of Binding, far less personal and long-term, but also more prone to error. A Pact is absolutely specific about its goal, and the sorcerer has no responsibility to provide the demon's Need except precisely as specified by the terms. It may be thought of as a legalistic deal, short-term or long-term, with a precise terminating clause.

Use the table on the next page for bonus dice to the demon's Pacting roll:

I poured the vial's contents on the back bottom steps of Leniqua's dais -a pale stream that quivered and undulated with uncanny life and luster as it fell in the god's shadow. When the vial was empty I ignited the heap of powder.

It burned instantly with a clear, high-leaping flame. Immediately, it seemed, the air was full of leaping phantoms . . .

. . . Lascivious blue cadavers intertwined around us.

Miscegenations of women and tigers arched over us. Monsters double-headed and triple-tailed, goblins and ghouls rose obliquely to the far ceiling or rolled and melted to other and more nameless apparitions in lower air.

Green sea-things, like unions of drowned men and octopi, coiled and dribbled with dank slime along the floor.

—C.A. Smith, *The Theft of Thirty-Nine Girdles*

Time	Tasks			
	One act (specified or not)	Several specified acts	Unspecified acts (with single goal)	Wide open ("service")
Instant	0	1	2	3
Time-consuming task	1	2	3	4
Indefinite (until done)	2	3	4	5
Very long, years	3	4	5	6
Inhumanly long	4	5	6	7

If the sorcerer wins the Pact roll, the demon simply obeys, consistent with the spirit as well as the letter of the command as far as it is able. However, if the demon wins, it will take either of the following routes:

- ▼ Pervert the intent of the command as best it can.
- ▼ Obey well enough, but demand more "pay," i.e. Need, either before, during, or after the task is done.
- ▼ Reject the Pact entirely, up to and including attacking the sorcerer.

Why Pact instead of Bind? It is, on the average, harder than Binding, and since it seems like a "lesser" form of Binding, why should that be? Part of the explanation is to look at it from the demon point of view. Pacting is a **deal**, not a **relationship**. This manifests in a couple of ways.

- ▼ The sorcerer is responsible for a token bestowal of the demon's Need, but is not responsible for it in general.
- ▼ There is a highly specific task at hand ("guard that doorway," "kill that guy") that concludes the Pact – even if it's Wide Open, it's still goal-oriented in a way that Binding is not. Therefore the demon has to devote itself to that one thing.

The Pact rules are built to permit shallow, instruction-specific sorcerer-demon interaction. The Binding rules are built to permit deeper, relationship-oriented sorcerer-demon interaction.

So a demon who Pacts for "Wide open, Very long" is not getting what it would get from the usual, more general Binding. It has to worry about its Need more than it would otherwise, and it has to pay attention to this one stupid thing instead of looking all 'round for ways to indulge its Desire.

Looking at it in strictly game terms, the specificity of Pacting (any Pacting, compared to Binding) is a real bonus to a sorcerer. He or she is getting a lot of cooperation out of this demon, relative to a given task. Therefore in game terms, it's harder to do.

Binding is not itself tremendously hard; what's hard is keeping the demon's Will more or less under control and coping with its manipulative, addictive ways. Pacting is harder, but once it's established, the demon is guaranteed to do as directed before going home.

Overtly sorcerous protagonists in the source literature tend to avoid classic Binding, preferring to Pact. When dealing with the lesser types of demon, they will cut a single, fairly straightforward deal. Such a character also tends to think of most demons as fairly easily dealt with (kind of the "look 'em in the eye, they're really just big sissies" attitude).

However, once more powerful demons are involved, things change quickly. The fun part here, of course, is that heroes get overconfident and go ahead and Bind "just this once." Then they discover they have become servants, not masters, which is the very heart of stories like *Stormbringer* and *Bloodstone* (note who gets top billing in the titles!). The sorcerer's rage at this juncture drives the key decision-point of the story.

Swords

As far as magic weapons go, swords are pretty much the way. However, you don't just pick up a sword and enchant it; these are Demon Characters who are fully active in the storyline and interactions, not just combat utility devices. They aren't common in the literature, the few examples being Tyrfing, Stormbringer, the Sword of Okio, and (granted, it's a ring, not a sword) Bloodstone. Here are some common characteristics:

- ▼ Swords don't talk. They're objects, with their demonic actions reflected in when their powers do and don't manifest, and in how the user's emotions and Humanity are affected.
- ▼ Their Desires are absolutely fanatical and are usually highly dramatic, such as Ruin, whether broadly applied or rather focused (e.g. toward a family line or a specific goal like Ragnarok).
- ▼ The user must make Humanity vs. Power rolls quite often, perhaps even including coping with the demon's Taint and usually associated with specific emotional content.
- ▼ The sword's abilities may require the user to commit to a fight, i.e. by doing damage with no demonic aid, before kicking in with demon abilities.
- ▼ They're just plain perverse, i.e., they like to stop working once in a while just to keep the user from getting cocky. Furthermore, they get bored easily and escalate their values-oriented demands on the wielder's behavior.

NECROMANCY

Now for the new sorcery! However, put aside any notion of stumble-bum zombies and skeletons lurching about, or hopping out of alcoves to be mown down without a moment's thought. Undead are much more interesting than that.

Humanity for necromancers

Humanity, whatever it may be, is necessarily antithetical to the arts practiced by necromancers. Given that sorcery per se endangers Humanity, Necromancy is much worse.

Humanity checks are made exactly following the rules in *SORCERER*, but loss of Humanity may well entail the loss of living, organic functions, such as sight, sexual potency, or physical strength. Humanity or certainly means becoming an Undead Thing of some kind, but probably in ways that the player would not find advantageous in any sense. (For achieving undead-lich status, as opposed to getting there through Humanity loss alone, see below.)

The token

Necromancy operates off the basic principle that the moment of death generates power. For Necromancy to be employed, a living being must die. The killing act is transmuted into a pool of bonus dice equal to the Humanity of the victim at the time of death, modified by all the usual role-playing bonuses from *Sorcerer*. This value is represented by a game mechanic called the Token, which is the main new concept for *Sorcerer* rules regarding Necromancy.

How is the Token used? The bonus dice it "holds" may be applied reusably to a wide variety of activities, including but not limited to the following.

- ▼ Killing something or someone else, basically just transferring the killing from one instance to another. Just right for poisons and weapons, although not limited to them.
- ▼ Counter one's own death or that of another. In either case, this may be:
 - before it happens (the old hide-the-heart trick, e.g.)
 - preserve one's own dead self, or the lich option (see the relevant section below)
- ▼ An unrelated activity. The GM needs to decide just how flexible the original "death" act may be in terms of its future uses.
 - imbuing oneself with power (usually Boost of some kind)

Arioch! Arioch! Blood and souls
for my lord Arioch!

—M. Moorcock, *Elric of
Melniboné*

O Set! . . . Grant us victory this
day and I will offer up to thee five
hundred virgins of Shamar,
writhing in their blood!

—R. E. Howard, *The Scarlet
Citadel*

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- conferring bonuses to sorcerous ritual: Necromancy or any other kind of sorcery
- direct bonuses to any demon's Power
- gaining horrific insights of some sort, with Lore, Hint, and Perception

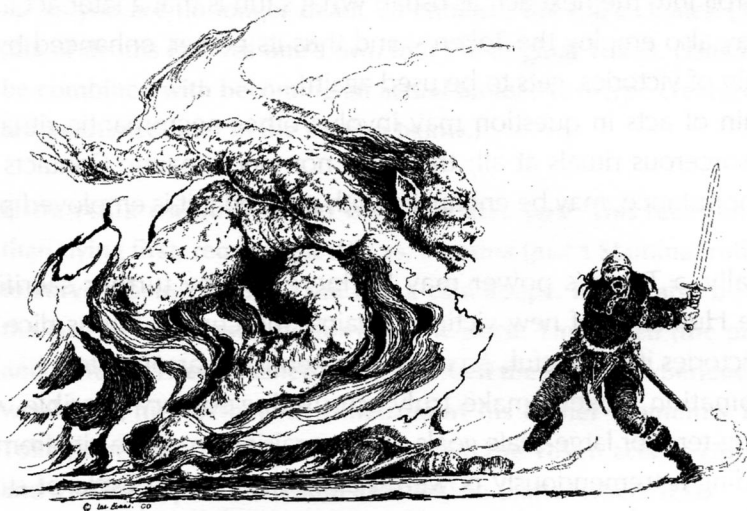
Tokens are immensely widely applicable, but the wielder of the Token should be employing significant dice penalties.

- ▼ A specific act involved in the killing, in which well mean repeating or at least symbolizing
- ▼ A physical object involved in the killing, which was used. Such an object could easily be used even as an Object Demon.
- ▼ A condition of some kind (circumstances in which case using the Token means being under th

Furthermore, using a Token for any purpose in some ability like Cloak is being employed.

Tokens are not batteries, and their game-use is in physics-mentality. The bonuses do not transfer in any kind of physical way. They have meaning in the actions employed to make use of them are applied.

The astute player will recognize that the tendency to convert victories from one roll to bonuses in sequence is of course quite high, due to the T



- conferring bonuses to sorcerous rituals of all kinds, whether more Necromancy or any other kind of sorcery
- direct bonuses to any demon's Power
- gaining horrific insights of some sort, with some combination of Boost Lore, Hint, and Perception

Tokens are immensely widely applicable, but using them is highly ritualized. The wielder of the Token should be employing any of the following or suffer significant dice penalties.

- ▼ A specific act involved in the killing, in which case "using" the Token may well mean repeating or at least symbolizing the act.
- ▼ A physical object involved in the killing, which is simply brandished to be used. Such an object could easily be used additionally as a Contain or even Object Demon.
- ▼ A condition of some kind (circumstances relevant to the killing), in which case using the Token means being under those conditions.

Furthermore, using a Token for any purpose is a grossly obvious act unless some ability like Cloak is being employed.

Tokens are not batteries, and their game-use should not be governed by physics-mentality. The bonuses do not transfer as "energy" to the target or task in any kind of physical way. They have meaning as meaning, theme, alone. If the actions employed to make use of them are appropriate, then the bonuses are applied.

The astute player will recognize that Tokens offer a wonderful opportunity to convert victories from one roll to bonuses on the next. The initial act of a sequence is of course quite high, due to the Token being used. If successful,

the victories roll into the next act, as usual. What's fun is that a later act in the sequence may also employ the Token – and thus its power, enhanced by the previous chain of victories, gets to be used again!

The chain of acts in question may involve other necromantic rituals as well as any sorcerous rituals at all; therefore non-necromantic Contacts and Summons, for instance, may be enhanced with a Token if it is employed properly.

And finally, a Token's power may be increased by further sacrifices, matching the Humanity of new victim(s) against the current bonus dice and adding the victories if successful. An ancient Token is a fearsome item.

In combination, Tokens make truly astounding sorcery possible, with extremely long-term or large-scale goals, such as raising an entire city from the dead to Binding a tremendously powerful demon. A whole cycle of stories may be built on such an endeavor. Literary examples include Xaltotun's scheme to resurrect the age of Acheron in "Hour of the Dragon", the rokubo's plot in *Tomoe Gozen*, and the ongoing duel between Pyre and Ekron throughout the three Tiana books.

These examples are taken from a variety of sources in the literature and don't necessarily correspond to the settings described in the other examples.

KEEP YOUR DEAD GIRLFRIEND ALIVE. Use her death to establish the original Token. Then, using the Token for bonus dice, Contact and Summon her as a Possessor demon and Bind her into her own dead body, using hypnotism and drugs to reinforce the Binding (thus they must be renewed periodically). As long as she doesn't realize what she is and rebel against the Binding, and as long as the Token remains, there she is. Another roll that might be factored in for bonuses is the sorcerer's Will against his own Humanity, representing the perversion of his love for her.

KEEP YOUR ENEMY'S SOUL AROUND AS A TORMENTED SERVANT. Again, use the fellow's own death to establish the Token and carry out the usual Contact, Summon, and Bind, making sure that the resulting demon is Inconspicuous and has Stamina 1 and keep it in a Contain defined by the limits of the household.

RESURRECT YOURSELF IF YOUR SKULL IS REASSEMBLED. Here, one is setting up the Necromancy in advance, using one's own Humanity for the Token (the skull). Should the skull be whole and the proper ritual employed, the Token's dice are used as a Vitality ability against one's own Stamina. The result is full, one-time resurrection from death. The Token is of course "destroyed" inso-

far as you are no longer dead. To enhance the roll's chance of success, get lots of deaths besides one's own into the original Token. (This idea may also be combined with becoming an actual undead lich-type creature; those rules are presented later in the section below.)

HIDE YOUR ORGANS SO NO ONE CAN KILL YOU. This relies on injury rather than dying first, requiring a Will vs. Stamina (just 1 Stamina) roll at the outset to survive being scooped out like a cantaloupe. It may also be enhanced by the Lore of the person performing the deed. The Token (the preserved guts and so forth) is established for good when the subject experiences injury that would kill him or her, at which point his or her Humanity becomes the Token's power. From that point onward, the Token acts as combined Armor and Vitality as per the demon abilities, no matter where it is.

You are encouraged to create your own protocols for similar acts using the guidelines presented in this chapter.

One important type of Necromancy is generating great big dead-guy armies (although I hasten to add that such a scene never appears in any Howard story; in fact, the most famous canonical necromantic army appears instead in a high fantasy classic called *The Lord of the Rings*). Here are some considerations for such things.

- ▼ Spawn would seem to be the appropriate demon ability, whether for the whole bunch of Undead soldiers or perhaps based off key "general" types.
- ▼ Hideous amounts of Power would be necessary, probably requiring ongoing Pact payments, the use of really powerful Tokens, plus the cascading bonus tactic across many rolls.

A disturbing consideration

What sort of character or circumstances can make a heroic necromancer? It's not easy, and there's a reason why such characters are stock villains or anti-heroes at best.

No matter what the setting, sorcery is not science in the modern sense – it relies on intent, meaning, and theme more than causal physical effects. Necromancy necessarily has a relationship to whatever Higher Power might be involved in the game setting. In most cases, it entails blasphemy, the ultimate expression of defiance against the purpose and processes of existence.

In some cases, such as an ancestor-worshipping context, Necromancy could have more positive connotations, but even in this case the acts involved would be highly ritualized and codified to establish an accord with capital-E

Existence. They would also include many possibilities for the rituals to go awry.

So you want to be an undead?

Well, I shan't stop you, but achieving such status (?) must be performed during play, not during character creation. All the opportunity in the world exists using the Necromancy rules above. The character must set up a Token, of course, usually by committing suicide, or perhaps triggered at the moment of being killed. Its value of the character's Humanity may certainly be increased, depending on other sacrifices and traded victories from a wide variety of other possible rolls. Here is what happens to the character's scores:

- ▼ Roll Stamina and Will separately against the Power of the Token. If the score wins, its value is raised by the victories; if it loses, it is diminished by the Token's victories. Stamina 0 or less gets a Ghost character; Will 0 or less means the ritual fails and the character is simply dead.
- ▼ Lore remains at its current value.
- ▼ The character's Power (as he or she is now a demon in game terms) equals the original Will + Price (absolute value) – Humanity. Past is kept unchanged, but Price is now abandoned or, optionally, rewritten.

NECROMANCY IN XAR

Such acts constitute utter blasphemy against the One God and, interestingly, are regarded with loathing by demons, many of whom are devout. Necromantic rituals are all deliberate reversals or mockeries of religious worship.

Becoming an Undead in Xar is perhaps the most profound statement of rejection imaginable – separating oneself not only from the world of humans, but even from the regard of demons.

The Token is a vital body part of the necromancer (not from the victim), which is usually preserved and carefully hidden.

NECROMANCY IN THE BLACK FOREST

The most powerful Faerie Folk know that the ways of men are steadily encroaching upon their world, and they hate the dull and industrious reality with every bit of their wild hearts. They may be bargained with, if a person is willing to give up and even to harm the world of his birth. The usual reward is immortality, and a home in the surrealistic haze of Faerie perceptions.

The human grief resulting from such bargains echoes through a hundred tales.

The Token is whatever was traded out from the Forest into the world of

everyday reality. Such a trade had to occur; and the item in question is often a child or a valuable treasure of some kind.

NECROMANCY IN THE CLICKING SANDS

Buried deep in the ancient laboratories, lined with white linoleum that has never been touched by the sands and fumes of the world above, are machines and tanks that can re-make a person into a deathless, superhuman being. He or she is connected to the long-dormant database and becomes, for all intents and purposes, one of the Ancient True Men.

Of course, to eyes less romantically besotted with the wonders of the past, the character has become the android tool of a long-dead computer.

The Token is a console with radio or other long-wave contact with the primary machines, which may be built anywhere but is too bulky and complex to move.

OTHER STUFF

And of course there's no lack of strange objects and gizmos to consider. Just as in all of SORCERER role-playing, though, it would be lame to treat anything magical as a simple utility device. Truly magic items should be scary and horrific, at the very least unnatural if not outright horrific. Knowledge and use of these things can be driven off Lore rather than Cover or Stamina/Will descriptors.

Unnatural tech

Artifacts left by the Old Ones are scattered all around. A lot of so-called magical things are in this category, e.g. Tolkemec's wand, the "Wizard Slayer" sword in Undertow. Such things are presented fully in the context of the weird crossover between magic and ancient/alien in this genre. They usually have a recognizable physical element, at least to the audience or the adept. The Old Ones were not apparently into mass-production and such objects are always presented as unique. They should be assigned a Power and used essentially as demon abilities.

The first of Hurgin's war machines had now rolled up; a great, clumsy thing, mounted on toothed wheels, bearing a metal shod beak, and filled with clanking machinery that drove it with slow but resistless force. "Remind me, if we live, good Hurgin," Simon said, regarding the thing, "I would know something of the way in which these ancient rams were driven. I think sometimes I have paid too little attention to the lesser sciences."

—D. Mason, *The Sorcerer's Skull*



XAR

Magic lamps and carpets are too derivative, but Xar magic stuff would indeed emphasize craftsmanship and artsy things: illustrated plateware, ornate candles and their holders, chess sets, and sitting pillows, the poofy kind with tassels around the edge. Such things are excellent candidates for Object demons and Contain rituals, far more so than weapons.

In general, such items reflect the knowledge, exoticism, and general class of the setting.

THE BLACK FOREST

This setting is far more prosaic, and its handcrafts and everyday items are generally used, not admired. Good magical stuff includes woodcut prints, carved wooden faces in walls or pillars, waxen symbols with victims' hair embedded in them, and any everyday drinkable like milk or ale.

In general, such items' use in sorcery is sinister, demonstrating the perversion of human effort toward deliberate harm.

THE CLICKING SANDS

Technological devices that seem magical even to our eyes constitute the bulk of "magic items" in this setting. Regardless of their intended use, they are employed mainly as shelter and survival tools. The most significant, and

rarest, include guns – probably highly deadly but limited in their ammunition – and information-based devices like transmitters and recorders.

Lore, in this setting, largely consists of knowing how to make these ancient, half-destroyed things “go,” although not necessarily as their designers intended.

Prestidigitation and gadgets

The wise sorcerer backs up the real stuff with mundane means. Straightforward technology used with a little showmanship, what might be called “mummery,” is an excellent adjunct, especially for citadels, temples, mansions, and other forms of home. Demon abilities may be used to quantify these things, but take care that they make at least some sense to the modern audience.

- ▼ Hydraulics and counterweights
- ▼ Flash powders, explosives
- ▼ Sophisticated prestidigitation, smoke and mirrors

Hypnotism

This is a fairly important element of pulp sorcery, especially for adepts. It comes in two kinds. Both get a bonus if the hypnotizer uses a suggestion important to the target, or employs a focus (an object, phrase, or act) for his or her attention.

- ▼ The relatively realistic version, in which the target may be influenced in present or future behavior. It requires a degree of acquiescence to begin with, as well as direct personal interaction between hypnotist and subject. It's a straight Will vs. Will contest with cultural and situational bonuses; really good results only show up with Total Victory.
- ▼ The pulp fantasy version, which is practically mind control and full illusory powers. It requires first a Lore vs. Lore contest, or against one die if the target has Lore 0. Then, if that roll was successful, the victories transfer as bonuses for a Will vs. Will contest. Furthermore, the target does not even have to be aware of the hypnotizer's presence or to interact with him or her in any way. However, each command requires a new contest of Wills.

If rolls are stacked with sorcery/ritual rolls, and if the target is actually unaware of the procedure through trickery, some really tremendous effects can be generated. Both are especially effective when combined with drugs.

To summarize

Here are all the ways that a "magic thing" can be involved in a story in this genre.

- ▼ Object Demon
- ▼ Necromantic Token
- ▼ Contain, with a demon in it of course
- ▼ Unnatural Technology
- ▼ Mummery/understandable technology (to the audience)
- ▼ Hypnotic focus

Players and GMS should do their best to avoid any such thing being a boring, plain old part of the workaday game-world. Magic means magic – which is to say, terrifying and surreal.



Chapter Six:

MECHANICS & STORY ELEMENTS

METAGAME STUFF

Failed rolls

The dice system in *SORCERER* is intended to resolve conflicts, not tasks. This means that a failed roll does not have to be interpreted in-game as a “whiffed” attempt. The task being attempted by the character may actually be successful, but the outcome of that task – based on what was at stake in the larger, story sense – will be disadvantageous, either immediately or in the future.

Razir holds a goblet of amber wine and delivers a witticism to the veiled, beautifully-acoutered woman nearest him. The roll fails badly. Does this mean he stammers foolishly and spills the goblet down her dress?

The world was wrapped in the warm, comforting illusions that men spun out of their desires, but Koren had torn those illusions into tatters that would not be mended, for they were both swaddling clothes and funeral linen. There was nothing beyond these illusions, and he could either abandon himself in the void or build upon it. He was now free to do whatever he chose with his life ... or death.

—T. Lukeman, Koren

No. Razir is cool and suave, and moments like that are not for him. What's at stake, however, is his role at that particular suzerain's banquet in the first place. The failed roll gives the GM an opportunity to make trouble for our hero later, after the woman in question talks about her encounter with the handsome stranger, thus making the suzerain jealous.

Alisette hammers copper nails into a cellar-door, sealing it shut to keep the skeletal, wailing thing down there from clawing its way out. The roll fails. Does this mean that she fails to drive the nail at all, and hits her thumb?

No. Driving nails into the door is irrelevant, and she achieves that task without problems; what's at stake is whether the thing is going to be held there when night comes. The failure sets up its escape, and possibly its specific actions directed toward Alisette or someone she values.

Kaben12 faces off against a vat-grown humanoid with oversized, muscle-knotted arms, and combat ensues. On the very first clash, his roll gets the high score and thus goes first, but as it turns out, the monster's defense roll is easily superior. Does Kaben12's sword-stroke go "whiff" – in other words, does he miss?

No. A couple of possibilities exist. (1) The thing could simply have halted its charge and gone ass-over-teakettle to avoid the hero's flashing blade, or (2) it could have pulled a surprise maneuver that prevented Kaben12 from ever getting his sword-swing going in the first place. Either way, its attack is up next, and our hero has not performed some awkward, embarrassing missed strike.

Since protagonists in the sword-and-sorcery genre are rarely foolish or inept, the classic role-playing "miss" result has little place in their adventures. The GM and players are urged to interpret failed rolls in ways that do not reflect badly on the characters' abilities. The best example from the literature is the brief physical clash between Khemsa and Conan in "The People of the Black Circle", which in game terms would rely on two badly failed rolls, but which in story terms is riveting. And no, I'm not going to mangle Howard's prose by describing it here.

The especially perspicacious SORCERER reader will notice, of course, that this approach to interpreting failed rolls is precisely the basis for the Binding rolls, which are of course among the most important dice-driven events in the game.

Bonus dice

The base SORCERER rules don't allow much "bonus" dice except through

role-playing and victory/bonus transfers. In this setting, however, a couple of options are available.

Price. The sorcerer may trade up his or her Price during play to get extra dice for a stated goal, which may be short or long-term. This option is not available to characters with Lore below 2. Nor can it be exercised before or out of play. It is definitely recommended to Half-breed, Inhuman, or Adept characters.

The exchange rate is 1 bonus die for each additional -1 taken to Price. As long as the penalty remains, which ought to be specified at the outset, the bonus will apply to any action related to that stated goal. A player-character should probably have only one bonus operating in this way at a time.

Ego-assertion. The character may simply state his or her credo to get a bonus; this is just an explicit form of the usual “nifty quip” role-playing bonus from the SORCERER rules. Fantasy-adventure heroes love to tell people what they’re all about. The champion spit-sprayer from the literature is Kane:

What the hero says, of course, should be consistent with his or her Destiny, if he or she has one, and the GM should penalize instead of reward if the hero is being repetitive in word-choice or uses this method more than once or twice a session.

COMBAT

What makes a fightin’ bad-ass? In game terms, SORCERER permits several avenues to maiming-expertise; these rules expand on all of them.

The genre conventions are as follows:

1. Talent tells
2. Skill and experience tell
3. Tactics tell

As with everything else so far, adapting SORCERER combat to the sword-and-sorcery genre is a mixture of old and new. In most cases, existing rules are sufficient. For instance, both talent and skill, in game terms, are already subsumed in score values, and all that remains is applying the rules for scores as effectively as possible.

Other men you may use as
pawns, but not Kane! I’ll yield to
no predestined fate, and if I fall,
I’ll die hard and I’ll die a free
man!

—K.E. Wagner, Raven’s Eyrie

I’ll be slave to neither god nor
devil – nor to a freak of alien sci-
ence! You played me for a fool,
Bloodstone! For that I’ll kill
you . . .

—K.E. Wagner, Bloodstone

Given appropriate announcements of the character's action, fully three types of dice tricks are available.

- ▼ **Multiple descriptors.** A character may well have more than one of the following descriptions: Savage-raised, Martial training, Arcane regimen, as well as an appropriate Past, e.g. Bandit, Knight, Mercenary, etc. Such a character may often roll one of the scores first, to generate bonuses to modify the second, "real" roll against the opponent. The two rolls are considered a single action.
- ▼ **Rolling victories.** As in the base rules, any successful action whose effects feed well into the next action may transform its victories into bonus dice for the second action's roll.
- ▼ **Trading victories.** On a successful roll, you may choose to bump the victories down all the way to an inconclusive tie, to save them for later! They may be used for a function which does not appear in the SORCERER rules: to cancel "non-victory" dice of a successful roll, whether yours or a foe's. This is a great way to avoid or enjoy the effects of Total Victory! These traded victories cannot skip over time; they must be applied in the very next round; however, they may be spread between offensive and defensive rolls in a given round. If they go unused, they are lost.



What followed was too quick for the eye . . . Jack caught a flashing hint of a feint at the thigh – a sudden blinding flurry of bright steel – Sir George Banway lay dead at Solomon Kane's feet without twitching. A slight trickle of blood seeped from his left eye.

"Through the eyeball and into the brain," said Kane rather moodily, cleansing his blade on which shone a single drop of blood. "He knew not what took him and died without pain. God grant all our deaths be as easy ..."

—R. E. Howard, *Blades of the Brotherhood*

Now for that bugaboo of fantasy role-playing games: weapon and armor types. The convention that bigger weapons do more damage seems not to be part of the original literature. As far as I can tell, the four-foot sword fetish is mostly a 60s–70s thing, and the primary sword-and-sorcery literature doesn't go into much detail about the weapons themselves. Combat effectiveness is mostly a matter

of the principles described above, and weapon combat effectiveness is entirely situational.

What do matter are distance/range, the opposing weapon and armor, and surprise. These are completely intertwined and have to be taken as a unit, so that, based on events from the source literature, the following seem to apply most consistently.

- ▼ In face-to-face dueling, at just beyond arms' length, a sword should get a single-die bonus over either a shorter weapon and a longer/heavier one (including a heavier sword).
- ▼ In armored melee with many persons involved, the axe, mace, flail, or heavy sword gets the bonus. Under no circumstances can such a weapon get a surprise bonus, even when striking from a perfect ambush.
- ▼ In close combat, a dagger gets a substantial bonus and everything else is badly penalized; this especially applies to surprise and throwing. Also, for some reason, a suddenly-thrown dagger is truly deadly in this genre, so its damage multiplier should use a gun category rather than edged weapons.

Armor works as in the base rules; a GM is fully justified in calling a mace or other blunt weapon an "edged" weapon for Damage Table purposes. Shields may well add defensive bonuses against missile weapons and certain melee attacks. Feel free to make up your own tables for specific weapon/armor relationships if you like, although I prefer Howard's glorious naïvete regarding the names and actual definitions of them all.

WEAPONS AND COMBAT IN XAR

A sword in Xar simply has to be curved. Almost-straight or practically wheel-like, wide or thin, pointy or square-tipped, we are talking about curved swords. Other weapons include powerful bows, ornately-hilted daggers, long slim lances, and flare-edged shields.

The most important bonuses during combat come from flair and verve, especially based on expertise and coolheaded ruthlessness.

WEAPONS AND COMBAT IN THE BLACK FOREST

Most weapons are converted tools, such as axes and pikes, and an instance of violent conflict may well be carried out with a hoe as with a sword. This setting also includes the unreliable, clumsy, and yet wholly deadly musket.

Bonuses for combat are based mainly on emotional commitment, especially those resulting from intolerable pressure and conflicting loyalties.

WEAPONS AND COMBAT IN THE CLICKING SANDS

The people of this setting waste nothing – their weapons are necessary implements of survival, constructed of whatever might be available. Metal scavenged from ruins, body parts of animals (and semi-animals), fashioned into reliable items can be retrieved and re-used. Wrist rockets, short spears, and bayonet-length blades are most common, with bonuses for their use arising out of the ruthlessness and desperation of the tactics employed.

In sharp contrast are the few and horrifyingly deadly projectile and hand-held weapons scrounged from the worst of the forbidden places, still in working order. Bonuses for using these things arise from Lore rolls.

Muscles vs. magic

What happens when a primarily physical character confronts a sorcerer? First of all, very few of the sorcerers in the literary canon are physically inadequate; the tough sword-guy vs. weak magic-guy scenario crept into the genre late in the 1960s. Second, much effective sorcery lies in preparation: the defeat usually goes to the combatant who was caught off-guard and/or underestimated his attacker.

Furthermore, Lore makes a difference. A good Lore roll can give a character a lot of advantages, permitting them to call appropriate defensive tactics (e.g., in “The Scarlet Citadel”, Conan’s second match with Tsotha-Lanti ends considerably differently from the first). Also, simple speed and timing do matter, using the combat dice tactics discussed above.

CREATURES

The typical animal-type beast has low Will (2 or 3), but fairly high Stamina (5 to 8). They also have a Score which is equivalent to a human’s Past or Cover, called Nature, which applies to anything you can find in a book that describes that animal. It is equal to or exceeds Stamina. In other words, beasts don’t have Abilities like demons; they have Covers, which may be called Nature, which apply to flight, hiding, tracking, and so on. Also, interestingly, in the literature of heroic fantasy, animals don’t seem to be very well armored; weapons of all kinds work on them exactly as on people.

The general range of animals to deal with

Black, hairy, abhorrent, the monster lay, grotesque in the tatters of the scarlet robe; yet more human than bestial, even so, and possessed somehow of a vague and terrible pathos.

Even the Cimmerian sensed this for he panted: “I have slain a man tonight, not a beast. I will count him among the chiefs whose souls I’ve sent into the dark, and my women will sing of him.”

—R.E. Howard, *Rogues in the House*

might be: wolf at Stamina 4–5; horse or bear at Stamina 6–7; elephant at Stamina 9–10 and possibly Will 4–5; riding bird or bat at Stamina 4, Nature 7.

A player-character fighting an animal may employ a tactic that can't be used against people. The character may, upon using an appropriate tactic, make a Will vs. Will challenge and any victories may be applied as bonuses to either attack or defense rolls throughout the entire fight. These bonuses may be additive with new tactics during a fight. Appropriate tactics include:

- ▼ play dead or submissive
- ▼ use footwork to work behind or atop the creature
- ▼ bait it to rush
- ▼ speak and act funny (deviate from typical prey or threat)

This rules-modifier allows for the rare “unnatural” beast to be suddenly very scary, when the character realizes it has human-level, even sorcerer-level Will.

A few types of beast from the literature deserve special mention.

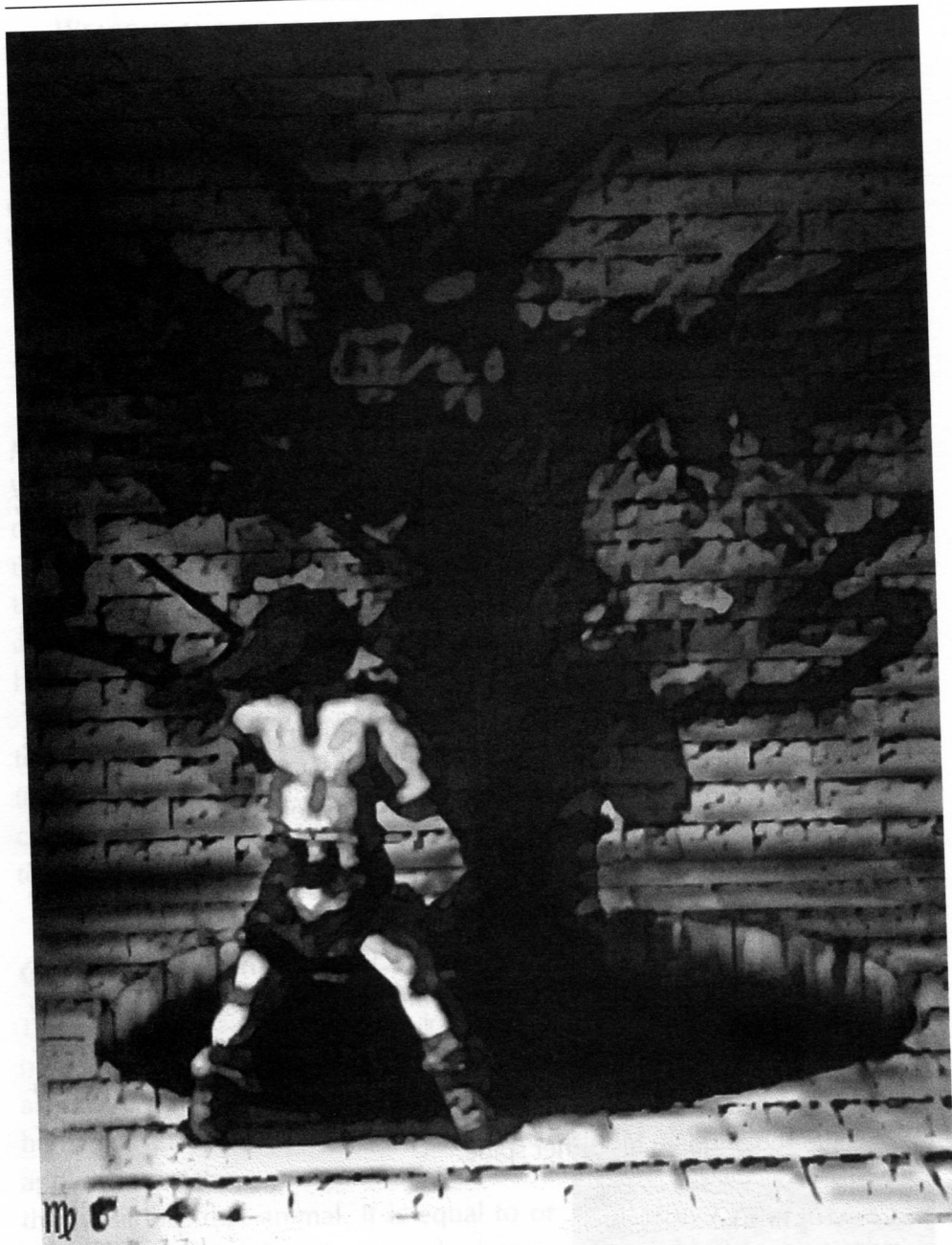
- ▼ What can only be described as Big Fucking Snakes: Stamina from 4 (for a weeny little six-footer) to 14 (for monsters like Satha); they squeeze for Special Damage Stun, and attack victories transmute to bonuses for the following round of constricting. However, the first grab to constrict does no damage, in deference to the genre convention of wriggling free a.s.a.p. The snake's bite is minor, for most of them, but their poison is always horribly, unrealistically deadly, even corrosive (Special Damage Kill). Finally, the neat thing about snakes is that even the totally mundane ones have Lore in the 3–6 range and can spot Telltales.
- ▼ Man-apes: Stamina 5 to 7, with Edged attacks (bites) and Special Damage Stun (maul). These are fun too, as they are either just bellowing their way up to barely human or they're hideously devolved once-human travesties; in either case, they may be granted a Humanity of 1, just enough so that a character may occasionally empathize with them and get a disturbing little shiver down his or her spine.

CREATURES OF XAR

Xar is an avian world, with far more overlap between birds and other creatures than our own. Various creatures would include feathered serpents and lots of small dinosaurs. One common beast across the land is the riding bird, whether four-legged or two-legged: generally very colorful, best for riding and not fighting, and not too bright.

CREATURES OF THE BLACK FOREST

Nearly all of the animals in this setting are completely mundane and general-



ly benign – the same old horses, dogs, and cats expected in any historical setting. Therefore any demonic versions of these creatures are especially upsetting and unworldly.

As for wild critters, one certainly expects some seriously big wolves: Stamina at least 6, high Will scores, the works.

Mice, on the other hand, are surprisingly helpful and witty, and may well have Lore scores above 2.

CREATURES OF THE CLICKING SANDS

All sorts of mutants inhabit this setting, ranging from savage humanoids to beasts that only retain echoes of their modern forms and activities. Their scores are wildly diverse. Frankly, they only differ from demons in having no Power score, and most of them definitely have abilities from the demon list.

The worst creatures in the setting, however, are humans, mutated and re-ecologized almost entirely out of recognition. They definitely have Humanity 1, to give anyone the shudders upon dealing with them.

POISONS AND DRUGS

On the one hand, this topic plays such a big role in the genre that it can't be ignored; on the other, perhaps the best approach is similar to money, in that the details are best made up on the fly. A drug or poison can be considered to have a Power rating, like a demon ability, rolled against Stamina or Will depending on the stuff and the circumstances. It's usually at least 4 and often considerably higher.

Here are some of the principles to keep in mind for drugs in this genre.

- ▼ The effect itself: sleepy/dreams, knockout/paralysis, will-sapping, hallucinating, and blinding.
- ▼ Method of administering: in combat, such as with a special ring; in food or drink, which is detectable only by characters with appropriate Score descriptions (Savage-raised, Court Poisoner, etc); and gas (which is essentially unavoidable in closed conditions).
- ▼ Colorful origins: in Howard's stories, it's a matter of lotus flowers and their various colors; in the Kane stories, it's spiders and sea snakes; and so on. Poisons and drugs have to be interesting, not mixed up from humdrum stuff but distilled from the venom of the black coral snake, or coagulated from the white flowers that grow on the graves of the hanged, or dust scraped from a necromancer's tomb.

XAR

This setting just cries out for exotic nifty drugs, from hallucinogens to smokeables to bizarre poisons of all kinds. They are almost always crafted and refined products of scholarship and alchemy. Rather than make up a highly-prepared, exact list, the GM simply prepares some fun names to pull out of his back pocket during play: rasheena, rrfa, and kaloo. When a smokeable, drinkable, or edible thing comes along that needs a name, he'll be ready.

THE BLACK FOREST

This setting is full of drug-type stuff too, but it differs significantly from Xar. The substances must come from strictly organic, normal-sounding sources, like nobble-mushrooms and gillyflowers and the like. The point behind this, of course, is that the setting demands that the "world," the real one, be a dark place with many hidden dangers. In fact, the GM decides to look up some real poison lore and find out where things like arsenic really come from.

THE CLICKING SANDS

Here, the materials in question are far rarer and less integrated into daily life. They come in two types: (1) the glands of various mutants, cooked or rendered into unpredictable chemicals, and (2) water from specific areas, treated or distilled to produce slightly more predictable effects. Their use, unlike their equivalents in the Black Forest, would rarely if ever be associated with the sorcery of the setting.

Chapter Seven:

THE ANATOMY OF AUTHORED ROLE-PLAYING



AUTHORSHIP

As stated in Chapter One, the player is the primary author and the character is the protagonist. The GM's role is to facilitate the player. The point of this chapter is to transform the idea from pretty words into harsh, clear role-playing reality.

Howard had a murkier mind than Burroughs, but ten times the poetry.

—F. Leiber, *Masters of Mace and Magic*

Brace yourself, because here comes some hairy-ass role-playing theory. It concerns the concept of stance: the relationship of a real live player to his or her fictional character during a moment of role-playing.

Stances

Please see the Acknowledgments for references on the topic of stance.

Let's say that Bob is a player with Bartholemew as his character, and similarly that Sam is a player with Sebastian as his character. What is Bartholemew to Bob, or Sebastian to Sam?

Actor stance. The player decides the character's decisions and actions with only the character's (fictional) perceptions, knowledge, and motivations in

mind. Its most extreme form, in which the player is thinking and feeling just as the character might, is called "deep immersion" or Possessor stance.

Sebastian, the character, faces an unknown, shadowy shape in the dark. Sam, the player, knows full well that the shape happens to be Sebastian's friend Bartholemew. However, since he also knows that Sebastian is ignorant of the shape's identity, he states that Sebastian swings his weapon frantically at the potential assailant.

In fully immersive play, the GM might have separated Bob and Sam to impart their respective characters' perceptions to them, such that Sam himself is unaware that the shape in the dark is Bartholemew. Sam would also be making an effort to imagine just what Sam might be feeling, down there in the scary dark place, and to state Sebastian's attack only if it "felt right" that Sebastian would be striking out in fear.

Many role-playing texts urge the GM to enforce Actor stance as the only appropriate one, but I do not endorse this approach at all. I suggest instead that, although Actor stance is often fun, relying on it as the default stance actually undermines the story-creating power of role-playing.

Author stance. The player decides the character's decisions and actions based on the player's own priorities, fully acknowledging out-of-character knowledge and goals. In Narrativist play, this stance requires the second step of retroactively motivating the character to perform the actions in question. Without this second step, this stance is called "Pawn" stance.

Sebastian and Bartholomew are sloshing about in the sewer tunnels beneath a city. Bartholomew has a ring in his pocket, and it just so happens that it's Sebastian's Ancestral Ring of Power, for which he's been looking ever since the game began. Bob, the player, decides that it's time for the secret to come out, and states that Bartholomew, while digging for his matches, asks Sebastian to hold the stuff in his pockets, including the ring. Both players know full well it's time for the "accidental" discovery that Bartholomew had the thing the whole time, and for Sebastian finally to have it and make use of it. The entire action of digging for matches is engineered by the player, or by both players, to afford them the justification for these plot events to occur, and perhaps for some amusing role-playing regarding, "What, this ring?" as well.

Bartholomew and Sebastian are fighting a mutated rat-demon, which is charging them. Bob and Sam agree that Bartholomew will hit it high and

Sebastian will hit it low, and the characters do so. The players are specifically not worried about how, or even whether, the two characters actually communicate about this tactic. They just do it, because the players are acting with full authorial power to dictate as much. (This example borders on Pawn stance.)

In Author stance, no one needs to negotiate about “what the character would do.” The entire group accepts that some degree of plausibility is the shared aesthetic constraint, but nearly any retroactive motivator is probably all right. The GM is not the final arbiter of this concern, although all members of the group, including the GM, are welcome to comment on it. Role-playing with a lot of Author stance going on tends to get a lot of group input, or kibitzing, before a proposed action actually goes into play in the game-world.

Director stance. The player exerts control over external circumstances of the game-world, usually those affecting the character in some way, in the fashion traditionally reserved for the GM.

The simplest example of Director stance is so subtle you’ve probably seen it or done it without thinking: the player introduces the character into an already-occurring scene with a phrase like, “I show up.”

Another minor example is when the player makes use of a handy prop without the prop’s presence being previously described. “I pick up the nearby tire iron and slug him,” for instance, when all that had been established so far was that the character was in a car garage.

In either case, the player has exerted immense power over the game-world, altering time, space, and the actions of others relative to his or her character. Easy, wasn’t it?

Stronger examples of Director stance include the following:

- ▼ Bob tells the GM that it’s time for Bartholomew to have a confrontation with the princess in her curtained, perfumed boudoir. The GM either cuts directly to such a scene, without concern for how Bartholomew got there, or establishes some time and space justification for that scene to begin fairly soon.
- ▼ Sebastian and Bartholomew have stumbled out of the stormy dark and into a small town. Sam suggests that Sebastian’s uncle lives in this town, or even, perhaps, that the local fellow even now approaching them on the road is the selfsame uncle (who did not exist in the game until this moment of play).

Some role-playing games even provide mechanics for applying Director stance, as in *EXTREME VENGEANCE*, in which a player may roll Coincidence to affect circumstances of the character's surroundings, location, and interactions with others.

The key concept regarding stance is that players shift among them all the time during play, often without thinking about it much. No one of them is "more pure" role-playing than any other. Most role-playing groups do tend to arrive at their own preferred set of stance combinations over time.

Also, do not confuse stance with speaking or gesturing in-character or out-of-character, which is a totally separate issue. Any stance can be taken using phrases like "I do this," or "He does this," or in any other way. Stance is a matter of establishing decisions and circumstances, not a matter of communication or delivery.

I didn't have the vocabulary to explain it at the time of writing, but *SORCERER* is built mainly to facilitate Author stance. This is not to say that every moment of play requires that stance, but rather that the game mechanics encourage it as the default. The text found in many role-playing games that urges constant, strict use of Actor stance is inappropriate for any type of *SORCERER* play (although instances of any stance during play are perfectly all right).

The ideas presented in this chapter take Author stance extremely far. The traditional approach, in which the GM "prepares" the scenario in its entirety and the players "experience" the scenario as written, does not apply at all. The GM does indeed prepare, and the players do indeed react, but the creative process is distributed differently.

STRUCTURE AND GOALS

The key concept is simple: **Story now**. Not "It'll all add up to a story some day," or "Your character will be tough enough to start a story some day," or even "You don't know this, but a really cool story is underlying these adventures." No. **Story now** means that the conflicts and resolutions played out openly on the table are engaging and coherent, at that moment. Sure, other crises and events might be occurring beyond the immediate confrontation, but the characters' conflict is the central interest. Sure, it might all be a saga someday, but the saga is built of units which themselves are actual stories.

Here, I am using a pretty strict definition of story, far stricter than the basic notion of "a series of causal events." It means the proposition of conflict, the pivotal role of the heroes' decisions, and a resolution of the conflict. Play moves from one unit of [scenario + decision] to another unit of [scenario +



decision]. Whether these units exist within or across sessions of play is not fixed.

Any one of these units relies on two goals: (1) presenting and resolving relevant conflicts and (2) developing an amazing fantasy setting. The GM's job, to facilitate the player's authorship, lies in developing both character-relevance and setting-intensity, or "getting them going" so that the heroes are embroiled and the players are engaged. Once everyone at the table is engaged and attentive, then they all share the goal of astounding and inspiring the audience – which of course means the very same group of people. The GM provides a physical and social context that inspires the player to express the character as an author might; the player provides decisions and outcomes that inspire the GM and other players as audience members; events in the game world permit the cycle to be repeated.

The next two sections deal with (1) overall preparation for play, referring to the group as a whole and the story as a whole; and (2) scenario preparation, referring to individual adventures, directed mainly to the GM although not entirely.

OVERALL PREPARATION

The scale of operations

The role-playing group should consider the heroes' story as a whole in terms of size. Is it a single novel like *The Broken Sword*? Is it a collection of short stories, which could conceivably be added to ("filled in") almost indefinitely, like the Kane stories? Or is it like a TV show, which proceeds linearly in small increments? The answer to this question defines how significant a single adventure is going to be, which is actually a pretty important consideration.

Take a moment to think about it: just how is a "story unit," which contains a conflict and a resolution, related to a given session of play? Is it bigger, the same size, or smaller? If it's bigger, how many sessions, approximately, would it take? Is there a larger story unit (a saga, or series of novels) within which this one is embedded, or not?

After all, if any two people have different starting assumptions about what a given unit of adventure should be accomplishing, then their actual play together is guaranteed to become frustrating. I spent a lot of time GMing superhero adventures, and I think they ran so well and for so long because all of us in the group knew what an "issue" unit of comics was – how much adventure was in it, what sort of conflicts defined its topic for the month, and how it fit into the larger story as well. Applying that to role-playing was easy, because the genre was so well-defined among us.

In a sword-and-sorcery context, however, most people's equivalent assumptions have been generated from role-playing games themselves, setting up a terrible recursion: we play like this because that's the game, and the game is like this because that's how people play. This chapter is intended to break this cycle of thought.

The number of protagonists

At first glance, it might seem that *SORCERER AND SWORD* is written for a single protagonist, not several. And in fact, yes, even more so than in the modern day setting, a squad or party of sorcerers is nonsensical. However, there are many ways to skin a rhinoceros, and here are some solutions suggested by the literature.

Variety. Different Lore descriptions go a long way in this setting. Two or three characters ranging from Necromancer Adept to Lore 1 to Pagan Halfbreed have very different approaches to problems and very different styles, even though technically they're using the same sorcery rules. This solves the problem of the "sorcerer squad," but leads to the next problem, which is, why be together?

Partnerships. Heroes often act as overt allies, usually in twos. Partnerships come in two kinds, which must be approached carefully during play.

- ▼ Temporary, with or without a conflict of interest or contest built in. The characters are tossed together and deal with a common problem. Sometimes the situation ends in a handshake and farewell, but sometimes in awful carnage.
- ▼ Inseparable if not seamless; the two characters are closer to one another than to anyone else at the outset of play. Conflicts begin usually when they are separated for some reason.

Players instinctively know, and GMs ought to remember, that the first sort does not simply metamorphose into the second over time. Resolving two temporary allies' conflicts usually pulls them apart, in geography or level of commitment to one another, whereas resolving a pair's conflict brings them back together.

Interestingly, in the literature, inseparable male-female partnerships are practically non-existent. Even in the very few, the characters tend to be separated throughout most of the story. I'm not sure why this is, but GMs and players might try to even up the picture a little, if they are so inclined.

Different roles. If the players can handle it, they might decide to play very different roles in the story. These options work best if the players are good at being spectators to one another's actions across physically-separated scenarios.

- ▼ One to shine, others to comment: one character is really the hero (often the one with a Destiny) and the others take a back seat in terms of action, providing assistance, but more importantly, a running set of judgments or reality checks to be appreciated out of character.
- ▼ 60-60: both or all characters are heroes of their stories, but the stories aren't the same.
- ▼ Semi-villainous player-characters: I've never had much success with this, but conceivably one player could run a character whose interests are opposed to those of the other characters. The tricky part is establishing the "dickweed" player-character as a protagonist to the other players.

Sequence of adventures

Role-playing games usually follow a 1:1 relationship between order of play, among the real living humans, and order of fictional occurrence, in the game world. That is, the adventures are usually started at game-time A with adventure #1, then progress to game-time B with adventure #2, and so on, forever. Each moment of game-time steps into the uncharted future. If the character

jumps off the cliff, well then, he does. No one knows what will happen later; it will depend completely on role-playing that scene when we come to it and not a moment before.

The problem with this linear, open-ended method is that it tends to result in bad stories, producing an endless string of capers rather than anything resembling a novel or even short stories. Is there no way to reconcile “player freedom” with “meaningful plot?”

Metaplot. The solution most often taken by role-playing games is a supplement-driven metaplot: a sequence of events in the game-world which are published chronologically, revealing “the story” to all GMs and expecting each one to apply these events in their individual sessions. These published events include the outcomes of world-shaking conflicts as well as individual relationships among the company-provided NPCs involved in those conflicts.

Metaplot of this sort, whether generated by a GM or by a game publisher, is antithetical to the entire purpose of *SORCERER AND SWORD*. Almost inevitably, it creates a series of game products that pretend to be supplements for play but are really a series of short stories and novels starring the authors’ beloved and central NPCs. The role of the individual play group in those stories is much like that of karaoke singers, rather than creative musicians.

Furthermore, over time, combining the cherished linear freedom of the player-characters with the fixed and “important” input from the metaplot tends to result in the player-characters’ actions becoming less and less significant to the storyline as time goes by.

A better solution. I suggest a different solution entirely: disconnect the order in which the stories are played from the order of the events’ occurrence in the game-world. Adventures #1–3 occur chronologically for the character, but are actually played in C-A-B, or B-C-A, or whatever order that is not A-B-C.

Here’s an example of C-A-B. Imagine a character whose *Destiny* states that he reigns as a king, as the climax of his career. The group gets together and (to focus on just the one character, for our purposes), the adventure they play and create concerns the events and decisions made by the character in gaining the throne. This adventure establishes a lot about this character – we learn what sort of king he is, and experience the dramatic content of his crowning moment of achievement.

All right, then, the next adventure is to be played. Now that the GM and players know the character well, they hop back decades in game-time, strip the character of a Past or two, and see what it was like when he first encountered civilization, as a barbarian immigrant. The character, of course, has no

intimation whatsoever of his eventual Destiny, but his every move and decision takes on powerful resonance for the actual role-players.

Finally, having run that adventure, the group moves on to play some adventures that the character could well have had between the two established points, perhaps introducing any number of characters and concerns to provide depth, or perhaps simply reveling in establishing more about the overall setting.

Some players are going to have a really hard time with this idea. They might say, how can you play a scenario when you “know the future”? That is, knowing that your character will live through the present adventure, or about world-events to come. The answer to this question challenges one of the most widely-held assumptions about role-playing.

Traditionally, players have either of the following concerns as their central problem, and index of character success, during play:

- ▼ character survival, pure and simple
- ▼ acquisition of clues regarding an unknown threat

Failure to achieve either of these during chronological in-game time is synonymous with failure of play. For some players and GMs, suggesting any other priority for role-playing is regarded with suspicion and even fear.

However, this concern is completely absent from the experience of reading adventure literature. Instead, most of the time, **we know the character will live**. The few exceptions are timed events that accord with the ultimate point being made about the character. Most, if not all, of the adventure story is concerned with the style, drama, and “rush” of the character’s approach to life, expressed in his or her decisions.

The present goal is to translate this emphasis from the literature into the experience of role-playing. Knowledge of future things does not have to undermine the role-playing activity, but instead can be a basis for high-quality authorship. In terms of this supplement, the shared knowledge of future things ranges across a wide variety of topics: simple survival (“My character lives through this adventure”), some forms of Destiny (“My character has something to do later”), and the outcome of played events that occur in the in-game future (“Ten years from now, my character fathers a child on the Queen of Demons”). In the context of all this knowledge, the question is not, “Will my player-character live,” but rather, “Here and now, what does my player-character do?”

So now, in preparing any scenario for play, the GM’s task is not simply to threaten or puzzle the player or the character. Instead, the task is to present and isolate any issue which requires the character to make revealing deci-

sions. These decisions are going to be relevant and interesting to anyone who knows what's been established about the character already through play.

In preparing an adventure, the GM should consider all known events, both past and future, as well as what retroactive meaning the session's events might have. The key factors for coming up with opportunities for decisions include relationships, Destiny, or details of established events.

BASED ON RELATIONSHIPS

Consider an adventure that plays no major role in any future events. It's a fill-in, toss-away story without any before or after reference. Travelling through the wilderness, two friends are victimized by a maddened, isolated sorcerer. One of them is captured by him and his spirit condemned to die, torn by the ghosts that the sorcerer is feeding to keep them away from him.

We know both heroes will live; tons of adventures exist about them. The interest in the scenario is whether the other character will really turn the ghosts onto the sorcerer, after the latter has revealed the reason for his actions. The old guy's plight is really pathetic, and he's clearly driven by madness and terror. The one character's cruelty in forcing him to face the ghosts is almost intolerable for the hero to stomach.

In role-playing terms, knowing you'll live may be a source of some horror, when it becomes clear just what you'll have to do in order to get there.

Does this sound uninteresting, based on our knowledge that the one fellow will live? Then read *THE HOWLING TOWER*, by Fritz Leiber and consider the Mouser's disgust, not at the ghosts or the sorcerer, but at his own actions, as well as his very different reaction at the end of the story. Consider whether Fafhrd could have done the same for him.

BASED ON DESTINY

Returning to the previous example of a barbarian-become-king, and deciding to play an adventure about what his very first experiences with civilization must have been like, everyone involved (the real people, not the characters) knows that he's going to live through it.

What's the relevant issue at hand, then? The whole Destiny notion takes its strength from the fact that he turns out to be a pretty damn good king, so the current notion might be to present him with a contrast between civilization and savagery. Imagine two characters: a hideous travesty of a man-ape and a highly sophisticated priest, and put our hero into a conflict of interest with them. The player is challenged to address the very same issues as the kingly version of the character faced, and to play up the contrast with this brash youth and our shared knowledge of the mature, kingly man. Ultimately, the adventure illustrates the important lesson learned by the

character about these issues, all the way back at the beginning of his adventuring career.

Does this sound boring, due to our shared knowledge of the character's Destiny? Check out **ROGUES IN THE HOUSE**, by Robert E. Howard, and compare Conan's very different reactions to the deaths of the two characters in question.

In its most extreme form, this technique permits a character to die after all! Now, all of a sudden, death does not have to mean "take this character out of play." Now it can be either (1) the climax of the character's saga, which does not preclude running further adventures occurring before then; or (2) an extreme form of intermezzo, requiring extreme game events to occur in later play.

The "intermezzo" approach offers a great opportunity for player-authored role-playing. Even given the knowledge that the character lives and has many adventures in the future, he or she may still die during the course of a story. If this happens, it creates the need for a "transitional" adventure to occur next, which bridges the death with the future adventures. That transitional adventure may be quite harrowing and even provide the entire saga with a plot-engine that had been previously unanticipated.

BASED ON KNOWLEDGE OF FUTURE EVENTS

In defending her land from invading hordes led by a blasphemous sorcerer, the hero is killed. Only by bartering his and her souls to that selfsame sorcerer can her friend save her.

This event – which in role-playing terms might be utterly unanticipated – sets up an extended story. Her struggle back from the dead and her eventual rebellion against the sorcerer are only part of it, as ultimately she must deal with the debased and embittered villain her friend has become.

Is death really all that serious a constraint on good stories? Then read **TOMOE GOZEN**, by Jessica Amanda Salmonson, and consider its events from the perspective of her friend Ushii as well as Tomoe's.

This latter method is especially shocking to traditionally-minded role-players, as the player-author role has moved from scenes and actions into the realm of entire scenarios and overall sagas. It requires retroactive thinking from everyone, not the least from the GM, who must be psychologically capable of letting "control" slacken.

SCENARIO PREPARATION AND PLAY

Once the rather staggering, large-scale issues about the entire context of play are settled, at least partly, how about considering a single adventure? The process of preparation moves from the known to the unknown.

Already-known stuff material includes the following.

- ▼ The characters' general styles
- ▼ The characters' Destinies, if any
- ▼ Personal relationships (to set up those Humanity checks)
- ▼ Relationships with demons, especially Bound ones

In other words, scenario preparation begins with the characters and moves into generating an appropriate conflict for them to be embroiled in. The appropriate actions taken by Cyrion to resolve a scenario (story) are simply not those taken by Fafhrd and the Mouser, or by Tomoe Gozen. I could not imagine a published scenario, for instance, that could be "run through" by any old player-character, in this style of play. The events of an adventure or game session are valuable insofar as they change or reveal something about the characters.

However, it's time to get more concrete and away from the character sheets, briefly. The new concerns are the locale of the adventure, and the people who inhabit that locale along with the main characters. Together, these compose the Situation of the adventure.

The situation

The locale. What kind of settings are most appropriate? The starting foundation was dealt with in Chapters One and Three, but the setting's best elements must now emerge through play. Now is the time to consider places on the map to bring into finalized life in the characters' story. Any and all of the following may well be applied.



- ▼ Expand the scope and aesthetic power of the setting, as described in Chapter One.
- ▼ Discover something (e.g. who are the Old Ones?) – the discoverer being primarily the role-players, not necessarily the characters.
- ▼ Continue and develop any already-existing, active sorcery, especially the sort which relies on rolling victories into subsequent rolls.
- ▼ Present a new geographical location and/or a new culture or sub-culture.

It doesn't matter whether the area being developed is small or large. The adventure might concern a whole nation which until this point was known only by its boundaries, or it might concern a single village. What matters is that the GM can finally unleash all that frustrated setting-building creativity that was stifled back in Chapter One. Be spectacular and atmospheric, and really build that world. Extravagance is good, extremity is good, and subtlety is good although it's really hard.

All sorts of things can be considered: is the immediate setting isolated or cosmopolitan? Generally dangerous or safe? Densely-populated or scarcely-populated? Scary or apparently nice? Are conflicts right out in the open, or hidden behind bland activities?

Finally, do not let the previous point about metaplot confuse you. It is perfectly functional to involve large-scale changes and world events in preparing a scenario, even those utterly out of the PCs' sphere of influence. However, the immediate conflict and circumstances must be about the PCs' decisions and action.

The people. This topic is still a matter of setting, but less in terms of geography and more in terms of politics, war, romance, and clashes of cultures. What the GM needs is back-story – a set of relationships, goals, drives, and actions which are only now reaching an intolerable boiling point. Something must be **up**, or at stake, whether tangible – like a cache of treasure, or abstract – like a province's independence. Everyone in a sword-and-sorcery story is intense, although not necessary complex. Even more importantly, they are negotiable, that is, willing to alter and adjust their behavior due to changing conditions.

One does not happen upon a tranquil, functional, blase community in these adventures. They are roiling with conflicts, schemes, hidden actions, and sudden outpourings of passion. Good models for GMs to examine include "The People of the Black Circle" by Robert E. Howard, "The Lords of Quarmall" by Fritz Leiber, and "The Dreaming City" by Michael Moorcock.

The conflicts are emotional, social, and intensely dependent on those exact characters in that exact moment. Furthermore, they are "grabby" – situationally to the character, but most importantly, emotionally to the player.

NPCs and their concerns must be presented such that players care about them as they would about characters in any entertainment medium. From the characters' perspective, it's as if the NPCs have all sorts of ideas about how the heroes might be used or otherwise participate in the NPCs' concerns. This approach assures that the player-characters are neither (1) continually repulsed from a situation by hostile NPCs, nor (2) standing on the sidelines watching other characters scheme and drive and do anything interesting.

The best NPC of the bunch, of course, is the villain. Sorcerer-pulp villains generate awe, mystery, and fear. They exist fully entangled in the same complex web of relationships as the heroes. In the genre literature, the old fuddy-dudd in his tower is way, way off the mark. Villains are gaudy, ambitious, aggressive, dominant types! They are into power, personal conflict, and their own sense of what is right and proper. They should be the grabbiest NPC of all.

Involving the characters. Given the power of the Kicker, and given the shared understanding that the player-characters are the protagonists, it's not at all hard to get characters involved in any particular crisis or dangerous situation. What matters is getting the real people, players and GM, into shared-author mode about those characters. The traditional modes might be summarized as (1) simply informing a player that the character is to go to a certain place and investigate a certain phenomenon, and (2) engineering a series of coincidences which place a character into danger. These methods rely on character-hooking, expecting that player commitment will follow, but in practice they tend to have the opposite effect.

Imagine an adventure which brings a young aristocrat and a similarly-young barbarian into alliance against a corrupt, intelligent, and powerful priest. The traditional method is to push each character into a corner, such that the players have no choice but to ally with one another: toss the barbarian in jail on a trumped-up charge, and threaten the aristocrat's life directly, as the priest has discovered his indiscretions. Of **course** the latter will hire the former and get him out of jail; of **course** the former will lay down his life in gratitude. Otherwise, there's no adventure. When the players balk at such strictured and expected behavior, the GM applies social pressure and hints that leave no option but to accord with the plan. The various efforts on everyone's parts to keep this process at least marginally enjoyable might occupy entire sessions of play, without ever getting to a conflict of any emotional importance.

What other approach might work better? It's all about authorship, again, and focusing on the issue at stake that interests the player about the character in the first place. The player is to be enlisted in the creative beginning of the

adventure before any perceptions or actions of the character occur at all. The GM should concern himself at the outset only by providing raw materials, not with the precise circumstances of conflict.

To return to the example, in this method, the GM has provided only the setting (this big, wicked city) and the central political power held by the priest character, behind the king, the army, and everything. The rest was up to the players, expressed by the characters' Kickers. In this case, the player of the barbarian character has already established that the poor fellow has been jailed due to his naïvete in the big city. Similarly, the player of the aristocrat character has set up the conflict with the priest in the first place. In other words, the **conflict** with the priest character had not been pre-generated by the GM at all, but by the players! The characters' motions and circumstances have already been set by the players, and it is the GM who must react to them!

Now the characters' meeting is eagerly anticipated by the players, and not shoved into existence by the GM at all. Now their personal concerns and differences are an engine for an effective and illustrative alliance, not a constant stumbling-block to their cooperation.

Frankly, the GM's "choreographic" role regarding the first whole chapter of the adventure has been removed. His or her attention is taken before play in only two ways.

1. Upon realizing that the players are interested in direct conflict with the priest, rather than, say, becoming his assistants (which would have been perfectly acceptable), the GM must consider how the priest might be defended and what his home turf is like as an arena for open confrontation.
2. The GM must also arrive at some crises and concerns that face the priest, into which he will swiftly act to enmesh the characters to his own benefit. This back-story provides the context for effective Bangs (see below).

See the final section of this chapter for further thoughts on enlisting player creativity rather than forcing them along a pre-determined path of false choices.

The degree of player input, or collusion if you will, is going to vary a lot. Some players prefer to see what's up before committing to an adventure; others seize upon the authorial opportunities before play. Each role-playing group must arrive at a functional version of the principle on its own, but the old-style method of beginning the player's experience with the character's perceptions should be abandoned.

Equipping the characters. Given the above thoughts on how player-characters relate to a scenario, a whole different approach should be taken toward

equipping them with stuff. In many fantasy role-playing games, the character's possessions are practically the definition of the character – what he or she has accumulated, what it can do, how many charges are left, and so on. Knowing what they have is easy: it's whatever they have left over from the last time.

I suggest instead that all such things be handled in a story-by-story, case-by-case kind of way. "Hey," says the GM, "I want to run an adventure where you're stumbling through the desert, clad in rags and totally destitute." So automatically, the character's beloved +9 Amazing Magic Sword is cancelled out of the game for that story. Where is it? Who cares. Or in another adventure, the GM and player decide that the character is starting off in a highly privileged situation. Bam: the character is provided with oodles of spending money, out of nowhere in terms of actually-played previous game events.

In all cases, these circumstances should be established among the GM and the players prior to play, taking the characters' Kickers into account or perhaps forming the basis for a new Kicker if that's what happening.

Driving with bangs

Now all is in place: where, when, why, and who, including the player-characters in each. However, what about how? What bloody happens, and how is the poor GM able to assure any happenings when he or she is no longer the primary author?

Here the basic **SORCERER** rulebook comes to the rescue, with its pretty Bangs. It is the GM's job to present and, for lack of a better word, **drive** Bangs, in the sense of driving a nail or driving something home. In narrative terms, Bangs tend to come as one of the following:

- ▼ Crisis to crisis: quite simply, threats to characters lives, status, or possessions.
- ▼ Twist to twist: information or "clues" regarding a puzzle, task, or general threat.
- ▼ Link to link: changes and development of relationships among characters.
- ▼ Locale to locale: simply moving from one place to another, usually associated with one of the above items as well.

Ultimately, all of these elements provided by the GM are the same thing: a means for moving from Decision to Decision on the part of the players, which then translate into actions on the part of the characters. Bangs are always about player-character responses.

This is why Bangs are not represented by many fight scenes or clues in traditional role-playing. Throwing mad hyenas at the player-characters is not a Bang if the only result of the fight is to wander into the next room. Nor is a clue a Bang if all it does is show where the next Clue may be found. A real

Bang gives the player options and requires his or her decision about how to handle it, which in turn reveals and develops the player-character as a hero.

The types of Bangs listed above might be fairly consistent throughout an adventure, or they can be mixed and matched throughout it. The former works best for short-term scenarios.

Effective Bangs rely on timing. Pulp adventure is famous for the speedy arrival of Bangs. The swirl of events in stories of this type seems head-spinningly fast even from the standpoint of modern action movies. How should such timing be planned and directed by the GM? One stands between the twin traps of (1) over-programming, to the extent of playing the characters instead of having the players do it; and (2) letting everyone wander around aimlessly.

The Bang-drivin' GM's job is to hold a variety of Bangs at the ready. They appear when:

- ▼ They are invoked by a player-character's action.
- ▼ They go off on their own, that is, when the GM establishes a crucial NPC action.

However, the GM must be ready to do any of the following at the drop of a hat:

- ▼ Revise "ready" Bangs based on the events of play.
- ▼ Conceive of new ones, which may require revising the back-story a tad if necessary.
- ▼ Abandon old ones if they are rendered irrelevant or are replaced.

Using Bangs is a cycle. Present them, let players riff off them and develop them, consider the events' impact on NPCs, weave and connect the outcomes of events so far in any logistic way that presents a further Bang, and repeat.

As a secondary concern, the physical space of each Bang should be interesting, for social, intellectual, and physical confrontations alike. In describing that physical space, the GM should provide opportunities for the players to use it for potential fight and social choreography, much like a stage or film directors.

In media res. The group might consider *in media res* run construction, that is, starting with the characters already embroiled in a desperate situation. Nearly all adventurous short stories start this way, with arresting imagery, the finding of a clue, or even a fight, only later explaining what the hell is going on. The concept is easy: start in the middle, not the start, of a Bang.

A player-character with "Past: Immortal" offers a neat opportunity here,

as the character's past (centuries or decades ago) provides lots of setups for such things. The Kane stories consistently use this tactic.

In media res can be employed two ways in role-playing.

- ▼ Mild: this requires plenty of pre-run collaboration, as the player knows a fair amount about what the character is up to. For example, the run might begin with a duel on a pirate ship, but the players and GM are fully aware of the presence of the treasure map and the months of work the characters have put into the situation before play begins.
- ▼ Radical: in this version, the player begins with far less information than the characters. The characters, of course, know why they're on the ship and fighting, but the players must figure it out during the course of play just like a reader of a story does, via flashbacks and dialogue.

The technique requires some re-orientation for both GM and players, because it almost completely dissociates player vs. character knowledge. If the group isn't up to it, then just avoid it. However, if you do try it, keep in mind the following things:

1. Don't blindside the players. Let them know that you'll be using this mode of scenario preparation before play begins.
2. In play, keep your grubby GM paws off player-characters' feelings and motives. If you toss them into the narrative soup right in the middle of the action, it is still the player who has the last word as to how the character feels about how they got there, and as to what they will do now that play has commenced.
3. Do not let the technique substitute for **player-hooks**. Just because the character is in danger does not necessarily mean the player is interested. That interest needs to be established early in the session just as in any other context for role-playing.

Do not railroad

Many GMs think they drive with Bangs but do not. Instead, they (1) rely on PC decisions that must go a certain way, thus forcing the players either to guess or be led around like ducklings; and (2) permit players only a final deciding role regarding events, after all revelations and events of the adventure so far. These and related actions are not facilitating the players as fellow authors at all. What they are doing is railroading.

Railroading is defined as the GM taking over the role of decision-maker for a player-character. It is often carried out in the attempt to "follow the story." However, its effect is precisely the opposite from that intended, as it decreases the player-character unit as the source of protagonism. Railroading is not appropriate for any form of playing SORCERER, and most especially

harmful in the context of SORCERER AND SWORD. Here, to achieve better story creation, the GM has to let go in certain ways, not increase his or her hold in every way.

The hall of shame for egregious railroading includes but is not limited to the following, often-observed GM behaviors.

- ▼ **Making decisions for the characters, expecting that “of course” they would react in certain ways.**
- ▼ **Giving the players pseudo-decisions, like presenting a task from a powerful NPC, when everyone is aware that refusal to cooperate will mean no adventure may be played that evening.**
- ▼ **Using in media res construction without the players’ prior consent.**

An extremely insidious form of railroading is buffering the player-characters from failure, by making sure the key to success is nearby, ready to be involved when they need it.

Historically, no one may really be blamed for inflicting the above outrages onto players. Obviously, **some** structure is necessary if role-playing is to have any story content, and the GM must have responsibilities and privileges that differ from those of the other people at the table. However, when railroading is occurring, then the players’ only ability to affect the game occurs when nothing important is happening, and their desire to affect the game therefore results in spending inordinate amounts of time on logistics – getting from here to there, provisioning, and so on. Thus dysfunctional behavior on the GM’s part results in similarly dysfunctional behavior on the players’ part.

In order to facilitate the players’ Authorial power rather than railroad them, the GM simply has to turn over the reins of making protagonists’ decisions. He or she still affects the game-world and the flow of play! One of the tasks at hand, however, is to set the boundaries of necessary GM influence for a given role-playing group, in an above-board fashion.

What does the non-railroading GM actually do? His or her actions before play are illustrated in the earlier example about the barbarian and aristocrat protagonists, and at first glance it might seem as if the GM has suddenly become a very minor player in the scheme of role-playing. However, during play, more is happening. The GM’s role is to practice a kind of organizational management, in reaction to player decisions. If a story as a series of scenes, it’s the GM’s task to make sure that each scene begins and ultimately provides a Bang, and that once a scene is over (i.e. the Bang is resolved, quietly or noisily), a new scene begins.

So in some ways, the GM’s role is extremely powerful, insofar as he or she

may say, "Right then, the scene's over, so next morning, you all show up at the pier," or even something so outrageous as, "Six months later, on board ship..." Greater or lesser degrees of this **cut** or **framing power** is precisely what a GM is for, and it works exactly the same whether the time and space to be "skipped" are very short or very long. It requires knowing when the old Bang is done such that the time has come to regroup, revamp, and decide which (and maybe even what) new Bang is up next. However, as long as the player-contract that gives all player-character decision-making to the players is not violated, even extreme exercise of this power is not railroading.

In conclusion, driving with Bangs relies on being **hard** with challenges for the protagonists and **loose** with managing the players' reactions and responses to those challenges. It's kind of a Jeet Kune Do of GMing. The GM applies more control over what's up and where the characters are, from scene to scene, but less control over what happens during important scenes. It's like riding a wave front, as the GM must make "prep" decisions almost from scratch as play progresses, relying on the flexibility to flow into scene-presentation mode from events during play that were not anticipated or required. The traditional notion of the utterly-prepped, utterly-in-charge GM, who knows exactly when and how the heroes will eventually confront the villain, is simply abandoned. His or her loyalty is not to a pre-determined storyline, but to the aesthetic challenge and narrative integrity of the Bangs, whether pre-conceived or developed during play.

To return to the music metaphor in the *SORCERER* rulebook, the GM is the bass player, and the Bang is like the "four" count in a 4/4 rock 'n' roll song. His or her role is neither to dictate the precise notes and content of the other players' music, but that count – and the right note for it, and the right timing relative to the whole song – must be there in order for them to perform.

Sword-and-sorcery is the rock 'n' roll of adventure fiction. It has never managed to enter the culture of role-playing, except in hideously shallow and debased forms. It cannot do so without its bassists ... and it's long, long overdue.



APPENDICES

THE ROLE-PLAYING INDIE MANIFESTO

The following material expresses the philosophy underlying The Forge, a website devoted to the promotion and development of creator-owned role-playing games. It's not a Dogma outlining any standards for the presentation and content of the games themselves – but it is a set of values regarding role-playing as an art form and worthy subject for people's creative efforts. As a Manifesto, its intent is to suggest that the reader consider these values and recognize them as an urge to action.

The ideas

The quality of a role-playing game quality is determined through one means only: actual play.

- ▼ Presence on store shelves, advertising, or peer pressure do not indicate a game's quality.
- ▼ Your enjoyment is your first priority – is or is not this role-playing game fun?

The “life” of a role-playing game is likewise determined through one means only: actual play.

- ▼ “Support” is a myth – supplements may be good in and of themselves, but their existence is not required to make an RPG good or to validate its existence.

Role-playing game design has new ground to explore.

- ▼ Do not mistake the range of existing game design for the entire range of possible design.
- ▼ Anyone is permitted to write a role-playing game; there is no special community of “designers” beyond those hobbyists who feel like making their own.
- ▼ Most role-playing design repeats past design without reflection, leaving the range of possible enjoyment untapped and unknown.

Theory-based discussion is effective.

- ▼ Such discussion permits people to enjoy their role-playing more and to design games with goals that they really want.
- ▼ System does matter – rules and text of role-playing games do affect the quality and substance of play. Learn about which system designs facilitate the style of play that you prefer.
- ▼ Do not mistake what you are used to for what you might enjoy.

Creator ownership is both commercially viable and highly advantageous.

- ▼ A publisher’s interest in an RPG does not indicate its quality or potential success in the marketplace, and similarly, a publisher’s disinterest indicates nothing at all.
- ▼ All it takes to publish an RPG is money, and in some cases, not much money at all.
- ▼ If a publisher helps you get your game out there, then well and good; but their ownership means you lack creative control and profit.

The means for “publishing” RPGs are many and varied. All of the following options have specific advantages and disadvantages, so choose carefully and for yourself.

- ▼ Free or commercial – either works.
- ▼ Book, PDF, HTML, pamphlet, or CD, or any combination – all convey what a reader needs to know.
- ▼ Distributed and marketed directly or through the distributor/bookstore system – either gets the material to the reader.

So what?

The following actions represent the intent of the Forge and its authors' call to action for others.

- ▼ Advertise role-playing games which exist outside the traditional distribution channels, in addition to those of quality which do employ those channels.
- ▼ Educate potential role-playing game creators regarding all means of publication.
- ▼ Encourage all discussion and testing of the art, design, and application of role-playing.

Visit the Forge at <http://www.indie-rpgs.com>

THE MINI-SUPPLEMENT PROGRAM**What's a mini-supplement?**

These are role-playing products for *Sorcerer*, sold from the website. Most offer detailed setting and scenario material, which also means a unique interpretation and application of the rules for demons, sorcery, and Humanity.

The especially cool thing is that all the money goes to the author, not to me. This is indie-punk RPG publishing at its best – if you can write a good *SORCERER* mini-supplement, why, you can sell it!

Interested in writing one?

The one stopping-point is that a mini-supplement must pass my review in order to be included on the site. I'll review any proposal, whether it's a fifty-page tome or a few paragraphs in "pitch" format. But my approval, including any necessary editing or revisions, is absolutely required.

What can be in a mini-supplement? It still follows *SORCERER* guidelines, in that it must be useful for others' role-playing. It can include any or all of the following:

- ▼ setting and background material
- ▼ specific interpretation of Humanity
- ▼ specific interpretation of demons and sorcery
- ▼ role-playing scenario
- ▼ art! (the more, the better)
- ▼ fiction – note however that it must be complete – no snippets, color text, or excerpt-style prose are acceptable

Any rules-interpretations or tweakings are welcome, but of course they will remain entirely unofficial and limited to that mini-supplement.

What to do

E-mail me at sorcerer@sorcerer-rpg.com, including any notions, text, or illustrations you have in mind. All material stays completely under your control and ownership, at all points of the process. I'll let you know whether the work is suitable for a mini-supplement, or perhaps suggest some changes.

After that, it's up to you to complete the project and set up a means of internet payment. When that's all ready, your work goes up for sale at the SORCERER website.

Mini-supplements so far include:

- ▼ HELLBOUND, by Dav Harnish
- ▼ URGE, by Clinton R. Nixon
- ▼ DEMON COPS, by Ron Edwards
- ▼ SCHISM, by Jared A. Sorensen
- ▼ ELECTRIC GHOSTS, by Raven

MUSIC

I am not the first to liken role-playing to playing in a band (I think that honor might go to the Chaosium crew, in a later version of *RuneQuest*). But the metaphor stands up extremely well, especially when I consider the perennial cry of someone reading SORCERER or similar games for the first time: "But what do I **do**?"

This question always strikes me as weird. After all, imagine someone walking into a music store and buying a guitar and a book or tape explaining blues chord-progression, then standing around in the store saying, "But what do I play?" There isn't much to tell this person, is there? Maybe one could say, "Listen to the good stuff, play your own stuff, make sure you get like-minded folks to play with." Yet when it comes to RPGs, more seems to be required in some people's minds – they want a note-by-note, all-laid-out song to play, or story to run.

I find this attitude nearly incomprehensible. Role-playing is yours. It's you. "Demon" means something specific to you. "Humanity" means something specific to you. Meaningful content arises out of those somethings, especially in the interactive environment of a good role-playing session. It can't be pre-programmed into this medium with an elaborate canonical sourcebook and lists upon lists of NPCs or weaponry. To return to the music analogy, that is karaoke – which I **guess** is a kind of music, but in my estimation hardly something to aspire to, or to consider to be the "most complete" kind.

SORCERER and its supplements are just like that guitar and a little how-to book on chord progressions. The art itself, of which others will say, "That is yours," must arise out of your own efforts and vision.

Think it's easy? Hell no. You gotta suffer before you can sing the blues. Some of your friends will resent the fact that you play in ways unfamiliar to them and have more fun. The retailer may not be as friendly, as you will not be hungering for the latest, hot new game. You will lose that cool insider-status from reading about and discussing that new game or who joined what company, or demonstrating your detailed knowledge of intricate game mechanics.

But you'll be role-playing – a lot! – and your art will be your own.

GET THAT GAME GOING

How about that other perennial cry of the role-player: **but I can't seem to find a good group**. I suggest that good role-playing groups are not found, but made. Role-playing is a great and fun hobby, and its success, in terms of your fun, depends on whether its social context is given the attention and preparation it deserves. You cannot “just play,” no more than you could “just” put together a softball team, a band, or a political action group.

Like so many constructive changes in behavior, learning how to make this good group entails losing some assumptions. In this case, the assumptions to lose include the following:

- ▼ The more players, the better.
- ▼ The longer and more inconclusive the outcomes, the better.
- ▼ The game to be played is fixed in place by the GM and will never change.

Once these are abandoned, things open up nicely. If you're not looking for umpty-ump people, and if you're not claiming to provide the One True Game for all time, to be played forever and ever, you've put the group-construction process into more realistic terms. Here are some more points to consider during the process.

1. Have a group meeting prior to a play session. This means starting not with, “Come on over and we'll play,” but rather, “Come on over, meet for lunch, and we'll just talk.” Meet, relax, and interact as human beings. Ask questions about what they think role-playing is **for** (beyond the obvious “just have fun”), give examples of play that you like or don't like and see what they think. Talk about movies or stories you like, and how you think their elements may be reflected in styles and methods of role-playing.
2. Don't go mad with jargon. Most folks I've talked to respond very well to GNS-light, but I don't recommend using any of those specialized terms, but rather examples that make the points instead.
3. Don't be all into what game you'll play from the outset, but rather have three or four to choose from. Bring along a few rulebooks to a get-togeth-

er so people can thumb through them. Even if you're dealing with hardcore fans of Some Game, try to get some freedom of discussion going about it. Maybe play a few sessions of Some Game, and then try a few of something else. Ask the other people what games sit on their shelves that they've always wanted to play.

4. In line with #3, plan for (and describe) solid, short scenarios that can be dealt with in 3–5 sessions of play and be done. Sure, maybe you have your 480 pages of original background you've been refining over the last fifteen years, but hold off. Just play in a little corner of your (or the book's) world and see if the game and the people can yield a good time. Explain this to the other people too, that you are not expecting a night of every week unto perpetuity, but, equally and also, that you are not planning on a superficial little one-shot either.
5. Say no when necessary. Pick your role-playing cohort as subjectively and judgmentally as you please. Willingness to play is **not** itself a reason to include someone – think of it like a band, where the weakest or more irresponsible member, or even the talented one who cannot work well with the others, is a drag on everyone else. Say no, perhaps covertly by never getting back in touch, or overtly if that's more your style. A couple of years ago, I thought I was all set with a group, then realized how non-functional they were and simply cancelled the whole thing, starting my search over.
6. So-called "experienced gamers" may be dysfunctional role-players. Look for those "secondary" players instead, the ones who know there's something they like about the activity but haven't quite been satisfied by anything. Be up-front about your hobby in social settings, show **no** embarrassment or deference about it, and then look for the closet role-players, who may have laughed in front of their friends, but then come sidling up and admit that they really liked playing ten years ago.
7. Be a socially-competent human in terms of the larger society. If you're adept at the behavioral and verbal quirks of the gamer-fan scene, put all those mannerisms aside. Giggling, head-rolling, pitching your voice nasally when you mean what you say . . . just stop it. When people react negatively to your statement that you role-play, they are **really** reacting to your shoulder-hunching, submissive, apologetic delivery. Look them in the eye and speak slowly. Study martial arts.
8. For males, a point related to #7: communicate to female individuals that you are not (a) hunting babes via role-playing, (b) an arrested-adolescent (look **up** when you talk to her, yes, at her face), or (c) nervous around women for any reason. If any of these are a problem for you already, work to correct them. Remember, you may or may not get the woman to

attend if you convince the guy, but you **will** get the guy to attend if you convince the woman.

In conclusion, get out there and do it. The time is past for thumbing through old rulebooks and wistfully fantasizing about how cool it might be to play one day. It's a great hobby – give it some respect and work to make your own creative ideas take flight.

ADVERTISEMENTS

THE SORCERER'S SOUL

In January 2002, the second and final Adept Press supplement for SORCERER is published in book form. See the website for updates and details.

ELFS

<http://www.adept-press.com/elfs>

Still perkily grinning in the midst of satire – don't dungeon-crawl without it. pdf sales only, from Ron Edwards, author of SORCERER.

Creator-owned role-playing games

This list is woefully incomplete, but it provides a start for encountering the diversity, drive, and creativity of the independent role-playing culture.

WUTHERING HEIGHTS – Chateaubriand in Space,

<http://www.pht.i.am>

By Philippe Tromeur – the Brontë-esque game of needless suffering.

SOAP – The Blacklight Bar,

<http://www.crayne.nl>

By Ferry Bazelman – neurosis and betrayal were never so much fun.

MULTIVERSER – Valdron Inc,

<http://members.aol.com/NagaWorld/mv.html>

The ultimate in infinite-world role-playing.

INSPECTRES, SQUEAM 1–3, EIGHT, CLOWN COPS, TOOTH & CLAW (see Wicked Press) – Memento-Mori

<http://www.memento-mori.com>

... and more – ladies and gentlemen, the mad scientist of role-playing design, Jared A. Sorensen. Don't let your fingers get too close.

ORKWORLD, ELFWORLD, CAT, WYRD (by Scott Knipe), and TOOTH & CLAW (by Jared Sorensen) – Wicked Press

<http://www.wicked-press.com>

The publishing home of John Wick.

PANELS, TOO MUCH COFFEE ROLE-PLAYING – Heartburn Games, <http://www.acid-reflex.com>

Games, thoughts, and inner turmoil by Clinton R. Nixon.

MUNCHKINS – Mike Sullivan,

<http://wso.williams.edu:8000/~msulliva/campaigns/munchkins/>

Beer is ambrosia and the television is God, but otherwise it's a fantasy game.

ORBIT – 6-0 Games,

http://www.geocities.com/~allianceprime/Orbit_HQ.html

By Jeff Diamond – science fiction with fun and frolics, bringing a whole new meaning to Josie & the Pussycats.

SIGIL, THE POOL – James V. West,

<http://www.geocities.com/randomordercreations/index.html>

About as much conceptual bang per buck ever seen in role-playing.

UNIVERSALIS – Mike Holmes and Ralph Mazza

Player-shared world-creation that really plays.

HERO WARS – Issaries Inc,

<http://www.glorantha.com>

Glorantha at its finest.

OBSIDIAN – Apophis Consortium,

<http://www.apophisconsortium.com>

Cyber-ridden darkness and demonic violence.

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