

SEX AND SORCERY



THE THIRD SUPPLEMENT FOR SORCERER

SEX AND SORCERY

SUPPLEMENT #3 FOR SORCERER

by Ron Edwards



Jeremy McHugh

**ADEPT
PRESS**

CHICAGO

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Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 0 9709176 3 5

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PO Box 14616

Chicago, IL 60614

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<http://www.sorcerer-rpg.com>

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Acknowledgments

I owe great thanks to Liz Fulda of the Sphinx Group, Woody Eblom and C. Liang of Tundra Sales Organization, and Eric Rowe of Wizard's Attic for their advice and support, as well as to Ken Hite, James Wallis, John Wick, Lisa Pondsmith, Robin D. Laws, Todd S. Luikart, John Leitheuser, Dav Harnish, Ann Dupuis, Jonathan Tweet, Greg Porter, Gareth-Michael Skarka, Paul Mason, Jeff Kyer, Matt Forbeck, Steve Darlington, Mike Mearls, Peter Adkison, and Greg Stafford. Special thanks and much appreciation go to Pamela Thames of Patterson Printing, as well as to my pal and partner-in-crime at the Forge, Clinton R. Nixon.

Thanks are due as well to the inimitable Forge denizens, 2000–2002: including but not limited to Cynthia Celeste Miller, Jesse Burneko, Raven, Benjamin Baugh, Ralph Mazza, Julie Stauffer, Tod Olson, Manu Marron, Terry Gant, Mario Bonassin, Russell Hoyle, Gareth Martin, Ferry Bazelmans, Scott Knipe, Walter Freitag, Josh Neff, Emily Care Boss, Judd Karlman, Mike Holmes, Jason Blair, James V. West, Maryanne K. Snyder, Ben Morgan, Rod Anderson, Fabrice Gdak, Eugene Zee, Mike Gentry, Christopher Kubasik, Melodie Henderson, Seth ben-Ezra, Tor Erickson, Dan Root, Blake Hutchins, Meguey Baker, Jared A. Sorensen, Travis Farber, Jake Norwood, Jason Blair, Christopher Chinn, Sean Wipfli, Matt Snyder, Fang Langford, Gordon R. Landis, Paul Czege, Danielle Hall, Jim Henley, James "Yasha" Cunningham, Juergen Mayer, and Vincent Baker. Julie Stauffer, Dav Harnish, and Benjamin Baugh all provided useful comments on the manuscript.

Last-minute life-saving wonderful thanks go to Michael S. Miller, without whom the index would have slain us all.

Let's hear it for the GenCon team at the Key 20 and Adept Press booth, 2002! With special thanks to Camille Throckmorton and Tom Luango.

The real Bobby Scurlock gets the Adept Press Good Sport Award, for again letting me use his ultimately cool name for a dubious SORCERER character. He's really a fine person and nothing at all like the characters I've pasted his name on to.

This supplement owes a special debt to Sonia Acharya, Kim Yale, Kas Dunphy, Kristin Fisher, Maggie Goold, Ashley Ford, Camille Throckmorton, Kyber Pierce, Elizabeth Miller, Wendy Browning, Anna Sanford, Leah Olive, Caitlin Coyne, Christine Battin, Maura Byrne, Julie Stauffer, and Simone Cooper.

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PREFACE

Much like a demon, this supplement wasn't supposed to exist. The first two supplements' content were part of the original vision of the game, and I'd planned to let the print-existence of *SORCERER* end with their publication. A couple of things happened to change my mind.

The first is that a series of in-play experiences led me to new thinking about role-playing, which to my surprise did indeed meet my requirements for a print supplement.

- ▼ **Innovation:** explicitly addressing the real-people social context of play, up to and including sensitive personal issues.
- ▼ **Worthy source material:** this content may seem less focused than the other supplements, including myth, literature, and pop culture – but under it all are the bass riffs of sociobiology.
- ▼ **Service to your game:** a vocabulary for handling among-players issues of graphic content, two distinct thematic models, a demonstration scenario for store and convention play, martial arts and sexuality rules, two settings, one developed in detail, and what I hope will be an interesting thought-experiment.

On horror's head, horrors accumulate.

—W. Shakespeare, *Othello*

Jeremy McHugh



The material presented here also reflects some of the life-long, troubling choices faced by a man, myself, raised in a partly counter-cultural environment, including a great deal of feminist activism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. This background resulted in – without boring you with details – a number of advantages and disadvantages in dealing with gender issues. Whether I've been successful in the presentation, I don't know, but for what it's worth, the supplement's content arises from more than role-playing alone.

The second is the honor of receiving the Diana Jones Award at GenCon 2002. I never expected *SORCERER* to be other than a fringe product for a small niche, but evidently some people say differently, and to them, I can only say, "Thank you very much." To learn more about this award, visit <http://www.erstwhile.demon.co.uk/dianajones/>.

THE TESTIMONIALS

As with *THE SORCERER'S SOUL*, much of the content of the supplement would not have been possible without the dialogues across the *SORCERER*-play community, worldwide. Some of these folks' voices have been added through the use of a survey I sent out in mid-2002. The survey was phrased as follows:

- ▼ What dynamics among the real people have occurred or been the case in the role-playing groups you've participated in? Marriages, breakups, get-togethers, affairs, pregnancy, singleness, and so on.
- ▼ Have these dynamics had any impact on or connections to the imaginative content of play? What, specifically?
- ▼ What role-playing/imaginative content has included relationships and related issues? Has anyone tended to play on-gender or off-gender characters? Has any sexual and/or relationship activity occurred among PCs and/or NPCs?
- ▼ Have these in-game, imagined events had any impact on or connections to the social dynamics of the real people? What, specifically?

I've chosen some responses, kept them anonymous for reasons of decency, and placed them where they seem most relevant. Thanks to everyone who responded! You sickos.

HOW TO READ THIS SUPPLEMENT

Discussions about the developing supplement showed me that people may need a visual guide for approaching the material presented in this book.

I made up an analogy for this purpose and applied it throughout all the chapters.

Imagine yourself, or the two of us, standing at the edge of a swimming pool. As long as we're not in the water, we're considering the real, live human beings who are engaged in role-playing. We can be talking about what they want, how they interact, and what decisions they want the characters to make. In the water, though, we're considering the imaginative content of play: what the characters are doing and thinking, how they're changing, what happens throughout the setting, and so on. Given this analogy, here's what the chapters are like.

Chapter 1 is about standing at the edge of the pool, at the shallow end. We're in the air, and thinking about how it relates to the water and the pool. Toward the end of the chapter, dip in a toe.

Chapter 2 is chest-deep, standing in the shallow end. We're looking into the the water, and mainly experiencing it rather than the air, but the perspective is still not submerged.

Chapters 3 and 4 are swimming across the pool, mainly in the water. However, think of them as surface-swimming, still in contact with the air.

Chapter 5 is wholly down in there, swimming around underwater in the deep end.

Chapter 6 presents the hardest transition: you've come up from the deep dive and sat on the edge of the far end of the pool, perhaps with your feet still submerged. The chapter looks back over the entire pool, back across to the beginning side as well as into the water itself.

As a rule, if at any time the material in this book seems to be horribly wrong to you in gender-politics, thematic, or player-to-character terms, take a step back and remember where you are relative to the water. In many cases, your reaction may be due to forgetting just who's the player and who's the character, or forgetting that people create themes, not the other way around. For instance, to consider that the imagined content of play should present limitations or barriers upon the real, actual people, is ... well, it's like trying to breathe water, with pretty much the results you'd expect. "Immersion," in *SORCERER*, refers only to enjoying oneself and being committed to creative expression – not to being or feeling anything other than an author or band-member does.



Chapter One:

REAL PEOPLE, REAL PLAY

Someone asked me a while ago what a SORCERER “demon” represents, in strictly out-of-game terms. The answer is easy: a demon is a dysfunctional relationship.

Tommy Speck was a seventeen-year-old, classic rock loving, *Dungeons & Dragons* obsessed Jesus freak with a fish on his truck. I found him incredibly hot.

—Hedwig and the Angry Inch

Can such a thing be fun? Sure. Can there be understandable reasons why it exists, and why the person chose to enter into it? Sure. Can good things potentially occur because of it? Sure. But pound-for-pound, it carries a cost in some way, shape, or form. No one can indefinitely shoulder the burden of another person’s desires and needs, and power-based negotiations about doing so have a way of breaking down badly.

Therefore the game is about the different ways in which these relationships can turn out. All sorts of character actions become multiple-character interactions, and all sorts of interactions lead to climactic fictional moments. These moments vary all over the place. A kind of “outlaw triumph” satisfaction may be found in achieving a character’s goals even with such a relationship. Similarly, a kind of “satisfied justice” can result from watching or experiencing the bad side of it all catch up with a character, including one’s own.

So far, so cool. Here are all these characters, doing all these neat things, and it all turns out to mean something interesting and emotionally-engaging ... right? Wrong. Thinking in these terms is missing a crucial point about the whole process.

That point is blunt and undeniable: role-playing characters do not exist. They don’t think things, feel things, or do things, ever, because they are fictional. For the content of the game to matter at all, what the characters “think” is not the foundation – the *people* must care, because they are the ones who invent what the characters think. These people are sitting in a group, talking to one another, and that’s where “what the characters do” comes from. And furthermore, these real people’s real social relationships are the matrix, providing the context, for all this creative activity. *SORCERER* is a game about fictional relationships created by a group of people, and what characters think and do begins, happens, and ends based on how the people relate to one another in reality.

So to talk about playing *SORCERER* successfully – and developing it into new realms of role-playing – then it’s time to turn the primary attention away from the imagined, fictional content as such and toward the real human beings, as they create it. To use the swimming pool metaphor I introduced in the Preface, we’re at the shallow end of the pool, standing at the edge, but not in the water.

PEOPLE AT THE TABLE

Well, never mind all the fun and basic interactions of having fun with friends. I’m going for the soft underbelly. When we get together to create imaginary events for fun, one of the three following contexts must apply.

Dysfunction. The dysfunctional game serves as an arena for some ongoing drama among the people, characterized by posturing, couples’ bickering and disagreements, attempts at seduction, and put-downs of all sorts. Mild forms of dysfunction are common, and in its most extreme form, imaginative acts of rape and abuse occur in the game as ways to abuse fellow players emotionally.

Denial. The in-denial game is based on the claim that social interactions aren't involved in role-playing, except perhaps negatively to "break immersion." The game content is the game content, and as long as people focus on it, then social interactions can't "ruin" it. This notion generally results in a bland, Ken and Barbie look to the characters, a certain lack of emotional charge among the participants, and less thematic payback from the game events. I think denial is a common defense against the dysfunctions described above.

Function. In the functional group, the interactions among the real people provide a charge to the creative interactions. The emerging story has value to the people who create it, and real-life emotions among them provide both feedback and raw material for the process. No matter how much or how little graphic or disturbing content is involved, such a group is most successful when the people already have a high comfort level regarding their interpersonal relationships, when they are plain interested in getting that story created, and when they are willing to use their emotional ties to contribute to its energy.

Fact: your group falls into one of these categories. The question is not whether the social interactions among its members affect the imaginative content of the role-playing in the group, but how. This entire supplement is aimed at developing function among the group. It sounds like a tall order, I know, and one supplement can't possibly "make" it happen – the real work is up to you.

Remember that swimming pool analogy? It's now time to look into the water, although remaining standing at the edge. How does the imaginative, role-playing content express these categories? Just to throw the issue into the highest tension possible, for purposes of illustration, the rest of this chapter deals with role-playing content that's highly explicit, indeed, sexually explicit. The question is, how can role-playing move into such content without the play itself becoming dysfunctional?

LINES AND VEILS

"Explicit." "Adults only." "Rated X." In most media, these designations are set by some sort of committee, to be enforced toward other people. In role-playing, however, no such committee exists, and furthermore, the creators

I just want a true relationship with the corpse next door; a woman who is solid, not just stiff.

—M. Mundt, DWF

and the audience are the same people. The limits or standards are set by the group through play itself.

These limits come in two kinds: *lines* and *veils*.

- ▼ *Drawing lines* defines what is and is not permitted to occur in the game, at all.
- ▼ *Drawing veils* is more subtle: certain events may occur, but they are not described or “played” in the sense that most events during the game are played.

Stu is playing SORCERER. Here’s the scene: his character has Bound a hot-babe Passing demon (a common character concept), and it balks at helping him during a critical moment. “Hey, tough guy,” role-plays the GM, “I don’t feel needed, you know?”

So Stu says, “All right, I [meaning my character] head into the alley with ‘her’ and we have hot sex.” The GM nods, perhaps calls for a roll or two concerning the Binding, and descriptive play resumes when the two characters emerge from the alley and proceed to deal with the situation.

Play crossed a line, certainly – the two characters had sexual contact during the session – but the veil was kept up, across the mouth of the alley if you want to think of it that way. What happened, what it looked like, what was said during the action, were all left unplayed and undescribed.

The basic question is: So what? What is the significance of this situation? What are its ramifications? If you’re still thinking it’s not much of an issue, consider the following possibilities:

- ▼ What if Stu’s girlfriend is part of the role-playing group? What if she’s the GM in question? What if she isn’t?
- ▼ What if a woman is present who is not romantically involved with Stu? That is, if they were both single and neither “just friends” nor exes nor anything, such that they could theoretically become sexual partners.
- ▼ What if no woman is present at all?
- ▼ What if the demon NPC were instead another player-character?
- ▼ What if the game itself included mechanics and defined circumstances of play that acknowledge such acts on player-characters’ parts?

In the nearby parallel universe, Stu and the GM take a very different approach to role-playing the scene.

Stu: I’ve [again, his character] got my demon braced against this stinky dumpster, with my pants around my ankles. We’re goin’ at it hard. The Binding is defined as sexual dominance, so I’m saying, “Who’s in charge? Shut up! Who’s in charge?”



GM: The demon goes, "Wa-hoo!" and heaves herself up, puts both ankles on your shoulders, reaches down and starts grabbing you, you know, as you're sliding in and out. She puts her head down so her chin's on her chest, then throws her head back, with her tits bouncing up and down really fast the whole time.

Stu (role-playing his character's dialogue): "Uh! Uh! Uh!" [He also takes a bit of Director Stance to add] The dumpster's going, "Creak creak," in this rusty crunching way.

Now *that's* leaving off the veil.

Call me crazy, but it's hard to imagine (1) that *that* imaginary scene has no effect at

all on the real-people relationship or potential relationship between Stu and the other player mentioned earlier, or (2) that the nature of the existing real-people relationship has no effect at all on which way the scene is constructed and played. And for goodness' sake, could anyone claim that the gender of the GM and player are totally irrelevant? Try reading the graphic version twice, once imagining a male GM and once imagining a female one.

My question is not whether these things and issues exist, but when and how to deal with lines and veils. Unfortunately, I have no handy list of skills and techniques for dealing with lines and veils. The best I can do is suggest that each group does well to agree upon a low-risk context for play, perhaps with a short-term game, in which the individual people can take some risks without threatening the integrity of the group.

Lines, unfortunately, suffer from the desire to avoid dysfunctional play, because in many groups, when sexual activity is occurring in the story, someone's probably being insulted as a person and getting his or her character de-protagonized as well. For functional play, there's not much more

to say than, "The most sensitive person in the group sets the line." For veils, though, things get more interesting.

Why draw the veil?

Maybe the issue is simply relevance. Given that the two characters have sex, we don't really need to know what position was involved. All right, that seems easy enough – if it's relevant, then describe it, and if it's not, then don't. Right?

Unfortunately, it isn't that simple, and my evidence is the strong double standard regarding sex and violence. Do we "need to know" about the details of critical hits and violent dismemberment? Much game-play and many game systems revel in these acts, with no veil, and more importantly, with no apparent desire on anyone's part for a veil.

My call is that the fictional events that correspond to immediately-relevant, real-life corresponding events or relationships are the ones which people veil. The real people in a role-playing situation are not likely to have a violent context for real-life interaction among themselves. If your character skewers a foe with a sword or blows his brains out the back of his head with a bullet, this act is probably not going to have an immediate parallel among the real people in the group. Therefore imagined violence in most role-playing has a fantastical, entertaining quality.

[One upsetting exception is when someone in the group really is involved in a violent situation with someone else in the group, specifically, a physically-abusive relationship. I've witnessed this, as far as I know, only once, so I can't generalize about the phenomenon.]

However, are the real people at the table engaged or potentially engaged in romantic, emotional relationships, with anyone at all? *Of course they are*, or trying to be, or obsessing about them, or recovering from them, or whatever. Furthermore, re-arrangement of such relationships tends to occur quickly, and without much deliberation. In other words, even people who think they are not involved in such interactions may well be, or about to be.

Therefore, drawing the veil when two fictional characters get into a sexual situation, even if one is an NPC, is *safer*. The entire issue is close enough to home, for anyone and everyone, that we all tread lightly when it comes to generating those events imaginatively, as a group.

One useful means to draw the veil is humor, which has benefits and drawbacks. The benefit is that the problematic material is still played, or partly played, so it can enter the content of the game. The drawback is potential distraction, or spiralling into further humor.



Why not to draw the veil?

I played a character named Puji Blowfish in a game called *Violence Future* not too long ago. The characters included a depraved male cop who eats his victims' hearts and still nurses at his mother's breasts; a depraved female cop heavily into S&M, as well as whatever you call wanting to kill your partners during sex; and Puji, a slothful criminal who murders, steals, and manipulates because it's the easiest way to be comfortable, yet idealizes his friendship with a woman he's never met. The story included much inter-character conflict, corporate intrigue, appalling violence, and capitalist demons from hell.

The female cop ended up naked and dead, straddling and still penetrated by the also-naked and equally-dead body of her mortal enemy; she was slain by a poisoned French tickler, and he was killed by her with a broken-ended glass rod, through the eye, as her final act. Puji ended up embracing his sex-slave as the only person who'd never betrayed him, and killed both her and himself on his own sword, pinning them together. The heart-eater decided to reform and give up his old life, leaving town with his lover.

Essentially, ick poo! (Barring the one character's positive ending.) What is the point of such awfulness, and as a corollary, its verbal depiction during play? All of us found ourselves explicitly describing scenes, acts, anatomies, and consequences that would have been way over the line in most groups. And yet, and yet ... genuine catharsis was really there; each death-scene brought full attention and "uhs" of agreement from everyone in the room.

On reflection, it came down to the substance of play, which was about such extreme emotional reactions and decisions that they could not be expressed in safe terms. The fundamental question of playing *Violence Future*, “What is honor,” can’t be answered without subjecting characters to the most intolerable stresses possible. The scenario’s gruesomeness, and most especially that particular game system’s subversive way of encouraging the players to provide more and more defilement of their characters and their acquaintances, are not the point of play but rather its engine. If the “car,” so to speak, is to be driven somewhere damned interesting, then all this spattered mess might even be necessary.

TAKE IT TO SORCERER

In the setting and rules ideas provided in Chapter 7 of the main SORCERER rulebook, sorcerous activity is all about pure visceral experience, married to intellectual comprehension. No “power through denial” or sublimation exists in *this* setup! It’s

... You can do anything as long as it's in tune with the forces of the universe, nature, society, whatever. If it's in tune, if it's working, you can do anything. ... As long as everything's connecting and coming together, you can get away with murder.

—J. Morrison, Rolling Stone interview

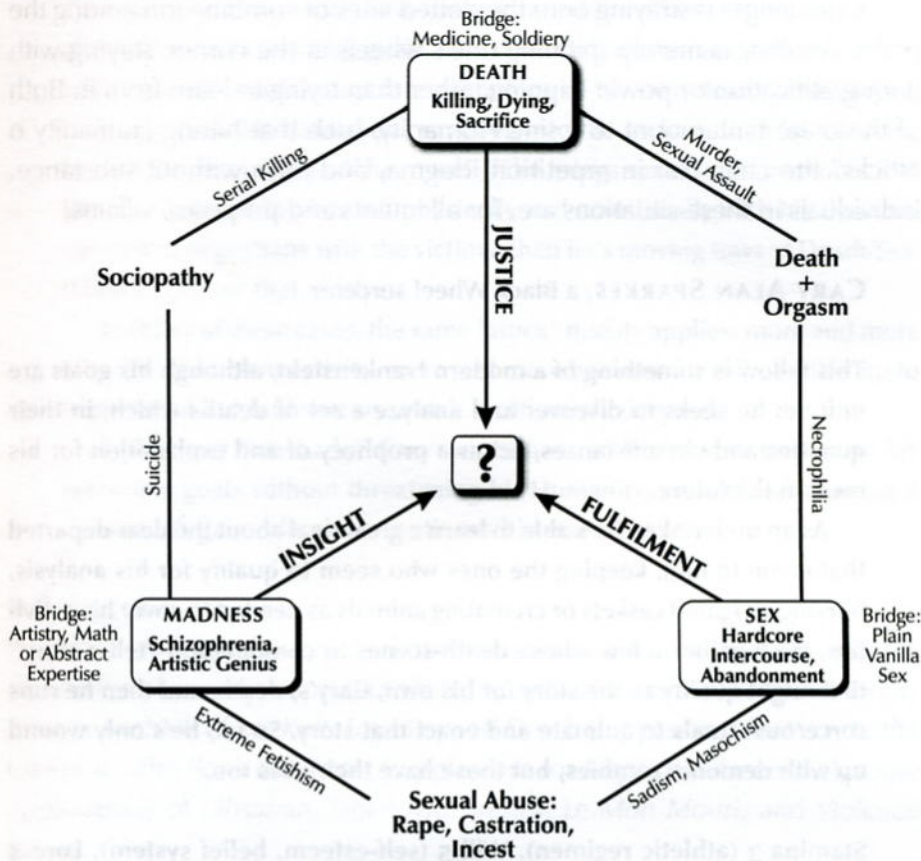
all about doing stuff beyond the bounds of what people perceive as right, or even real, and yet, somehow, making it work – both physically and morally. But this kind of premise means going over the line with little or no veil, and stories about it will include uncomfortable things.

An appalling diagram

Here’s a diagram based on three “corners” or types of transgression: madness, sex, and death. I used it as my operational schematic for the multiple scenarios and player-groups that led to the main book’s Chapter 7. My influences included the *Over the Edge* supplement *Wildest Dreams*, the first edition of the role-playing game *Kult*, way too many Hong Kong action movies, the television show *Twin Peaks*, and the novels *Nightbook*, *The Fan Man*, and *Doctor Rat* by William Kotzwinkle.

So, in SORCERER terms, the three corners represent Lore as it is made accessible to the human mind. Consider:

- ▼ Ultimate sensual gratification: emotional and physical sensation beyond orgasm, beyond intimacy. (Example: the Cult of the Dark Lady)
- ▼ Ultimate application of killing and sacrifice: making a death “count” as much as it possibly can. (Examples: the Way of the Black Wheel, the sanzoku)



- ▼ Ultimate perception of causality and meaning: seeing the underlying, most fundamental connection among any conceivable phenomena. (Example: the Psyche junkies)

Each of these paths begins with a "bridge" or normal human activity, listed at the outer corners of the diagram. For sex, it's enthusiastically extreme sexual activity; for death, it's living closer "to the bone" than most people, perhaps by practicing as a surgeon or experiencing wartime violence; for madness, it's being on the obsessed, brilliant artistic fringe. However, entering onto the path of sorcery requires moving beyond the bridge and ritualizing it into demonic interactions.

Kind of makes you twitch to think about it, doesn't it?

Anyway, moving along the arrows to the center indicates increasing Lore as well as successfully managing Humanity gain and loss. If one can keep Humanity positive as he or she continues to pursue the approach to the ultimate, then The Answer awaits. More accurately, the question may only be answered as the sum of one's life as it travels along that path: the sum of all decisions, and all those decisions' effects and outcomes, in full.

One danger is straying onto the dotted lines of combination among the paths. Another is merely spinning one's wheels at the corner, staying with it for gratification or power-tripping rather than trying to learn from it. Both of these are tantamount to losing Humanity, such that hitting Humanity or "sticks" the character in repetition, dogma, and form without substance. Individuals in these situations are, for all intents and purposes, villains.

CARY ALAN SPARKES, a Black Wheel sorcerer

This fellow is something of a modern Frankenstein, although his goals are unique: he seeks to discover and analyze a set of deaths which, in their qualities and circumstances, act as a prophecy of and explanation for his own, in the future.

As an undertaker, he's able to learn a great deal about the dear departed that come to him, keeping the ones who seem to qualify for his analysis, burying weighted caskets or cremating animals as needed to cover his activities. He'll gather a few whose death-scenes in combination "tell a story" that might qualify as the story for his own, Cary's, death, and then he runs sorcerous rituals to animate and enact that story. So far, he's only wound up with demonic zombies, but those have their uses too.

Stamina 3 (athletic regimen), Will 5 (self-esteem, belief system), Lore 4 (adept), Cover (undertaker, owner of funeral home)

Price -1 (creepy undertaker), Humanity 1

Cary becomes stuck in the Death corner of the diagram when he begins to select potential members of his enactments, instead of waiting for them to arrive through the course of his business. When he shifts from "undertaker who messes about with bodies" to "pre-meditated murderer," that's about the time when Humanity checks are going to take a steady toll.

In **SORCERER** terms, the player receives wonderful bonuses for role-playing (ick! feh!) and victories-to-dice from roll to roll, and Cary's Summoning rolls are only slightly hindered by his Humanity 1. However, and this makes perfect sense, his chances of improving his Lore (any attribute, actually, but most significantly his Lore) are very low.

Clearly, in-play content is going to get demanding, ranging from more and more elaborate and sincere efforts at sacrifice, more and more schizophrenic attempts to "make sense" of things, and more and more over-the-line sensual physical exertions.

Theoretically, Cary could slide toward one of the other corners as he tries alternate ways to reach his goals. If he constructs more and more elaborately schizophrenic models and interpretations of his own death-scene, trying to fit any available data about anything into the picture, then he's moving toward Death/Madness. If he ... well, if he brings sexual circumstances into the rituals, involving himself physically and emotionally with his demonic constructs or perhaps with the victims, then he's moving toward Death/Sex. (Didn't I phrase that nicely?)

In either of these cases, the same "stuck" quality applies: more and more ethically-aborrent activity, more and more bonuses for rolls, adding up to to powerful but foul sorcery which is ultimately doomed.

To become "unstuck," Cary would have to find a way to pursue his sorcerous goals without threatening his Humanity, and indeed bringing it up through gain rolls as he continues his researches.

References

Few role-playing games have dared to venture into this territory without the buffer of parody to protect them, as with *Hol* and *Violence*. The only ones I can think of are *Kult*, *Love Beyond Death* (supplement for *Wraith: the Oblivion*), *The Book of Mirrors* (supplement for *Mage: the Ascension*), some applications of *Obsidian*, *Unknown Armies*, *Le Mon Mouri*, and *Violence Future*.

The film *Liquid Sky* offers a neat example in terms of the diagram: the protagonist starts midway between Death and Sex, and remains stuck, continually victimized by others both physically and emotionally. At one point she attempts a form of psychic suicide. Then, at the end of the story, she shifts to the Sex corner and rockets toward the center. *Pi* offers a perfect example of being stuck in the Madness corner. Another absolutely horrific example is *I Spit on Your Grave*, perhaps the rawest revenge-flick ever made. It's especially scary because the heroine, initially trapped and victimized through rape (Sex/Madness), seems actually to have progressed toward the center along the path of Death.

Other good references include the novel *Wet Bones* by John Shirley, as well as nearly anything by Ray Garton and K.W. Jeter. Comics are an excellent source, including *The Marquis* (madness), *Grimjack* (death and madness), *Johnny the Homicidal Maniac* (death and madness), *Sin City* (death with a touch of sex), practically anything by Robert Crumb (madness and sex), *Faust* (all three, but not very successfully), and *XXXenophile* (a remarkably positive spin on hard-core sex).

When I was using this setting for many scenarios, we could not achieve a group-wide understanding of the framework through actual play, mainly

because our lines and veils skills were not well-developed at the time. Most of my role-playing since then has been extremely toned down (e.g. *Demon Cops*), and only now, following experiences with some other games, am I returning to similar matters in playing *SORCERER*. I've learned that it's not a matter of "ratings" – which words are permitted or whether breasts can be described during play. It's a matter of moving into even scarier waters of considering ourselves as role-players.

And now that this chapter, in a way, has drawn open some of the veil on role-playing, it's time to cross a line. We, as role-players, are male and female. What's that got to do with anything?

Testimonial

The most common sex/RPG dynamic in my history has been men inviting women they're involved with or interested in into the play group. Like in college where there was an inexperienced and not very inspiring roleplayer in our group, and when this other guy wanted to run [game title] he asked me specifically to invite her along "because she seems like a really good roleplayer." Riiiiight.

Here's a fun dynamic for you. So there's three roleplayers:

Betty: inexperienced roleplayer, not too bright, not too pretty.

Will: tightly wound, favorably inclined toward the idea in *Starship Troopers* that only veterans should vote, "secretly" but clearly interested in Betty.

Harry: likes to manipulate and control NPCs and other PCs in RPG play.

(There was a fourth player, too, but he was not involved in this exchange.)

I'm running [game title], and Harry's character sent notes to the other three PCs asking them to come to his place. For some reason, he asked each one of them to come at a different time, staggering their arrivals at half-hour intervals. (Remember, Harry liked to control others' characters.)

Will, playing the protective hero, had his character contact Betty's character. They compared notes, got suspicious, and showed up at Harry's character's place together.

We weren't LARPing, but we were getting up and moving around. We had a lounge on a dorm room floor, and the players acted out Will and Betty coming to the door, with the lounge as Harry's house. Will and Betty came in, with Will hostile. Harry was evasive (trying to retain control over the situation) even though he didn't really have anything to hide.

Suddenly, Will, in a fit of masculine protectiveness, actually jumped Harry, wrestled him to the ground, and twisted his arm behind his back. Harry yelled Ow, stop!, but we didn't have safe words, and Will apparently thought Harry was still roleplaying. Harry protested more insistently, and Will relented.

And after all that, Will never got a piece of Betty.

Chapter Two:

GENDER AND STORIES

This chapter presents the “core idea” material for this supplement. The previous one merely presented the notion that real people are the relevant entities of role-playing, rather than characters and events, but this one provides the basis for all the rest of the supplement. It refines the term “people” into “people equipped with physical and social sexual attributes.” The goal is to examine ourselves as *male* and *female* people, and to address the impact of these qualities on play and vice versa.

Thinking about that swimming pool again, now we’re standing chest-deep, and looking mainly into the water. Most of what’s in the chapter concerns the fictional material, what the people at the table imagine together, but the perspective taken in this chapter is still from reality, the real people. Why bother with this metaphor? Because three things need to be hammered home, again and again:

- ▼ The content of the water (“story,” “content,” whatever you want to call it) is created by the real-people interactions, and that’s a one-way trip. It has no purposeful, independent life of its own.
- ▼ When we, the real people, create stories together, we necessarily have



"stuff to say" about sexuality. Certainly not every story is only about this issue, but it is often present, and often central.

- ▼ The process of creation isn't simplistic. It would be easy if some combination of men and women at the table always created "Story Type X," and if some other combination always created "Story Type Y," but that's not how things work.

Indeed, along with the ethical urge of each individual to affirm his subjective existence, there is also a temptation to forgo liberty and become a thing. This is an inauspicious road, for he who takes it – passive, lost, ruined – becomes henceforth the creature of another's will, frustrated in his transcendence and deprived of every value. But it is an easy road; on it one avoids the strain involved in undertaking an authentic existence.

—S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

In *SORCERER*, the fictional events during play are going to be "about" something. Characters begin play defined as people in trouble, through their Kickers and their past history as sorcerers. The game's content literally cannot be about staying safe and whole. Decisions that lead to Humanity checks are practically mandatory early on, as both character creation and scenario preparation include moral conflicts.

Since we are ourselves interacting as *men and women* when we play, our gender interactions affect the material being produced, that is, "what we say." What that "said stuff" is varies widely, by age, by individual, by culture, and more. This chapter can only scratch the surface and isolate two interesting examples, rather than provide some kind of monstrous dissertation. I'll start gently, though, by refining the concept of Humanity. The rest of the chapter brings in the hard core, which itself becomes a bridge to the remainder of the supplement.

PLURAL HUMANITY

Humanity is a single number, but it is not a single gauge. It may well be composed of more than one element of behavior, and those elements may well

be contradictory. For Humanity to be meaningful during play, it must be consistent, but that doesn't mean that it has to be simplistic.

So let's consider Humanity as a composite quality. The easy way is simply to consider it one thing, but with lots of different aspects, like a color

... what man and woman loathe in each other is the shattering frustration of each one's own bad faith and baseness.

—S. de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*

spectrum; that's what the stuff in the previous chapter was like. However, the rest of this supplement addresses the hard way: two or more focused and contradictory definitions going full blast, such that the play-content is willy-nilly about the conflict between, essentially, value systems.

Let's posit a SORCERER game set in a weird sort-of-Haitian science fiction setting, in which demons are ancestral memories and spirits, some of which have grown very large and powerful down the centuries. Knowledge is a dangerous thing, and innocence and beauty are fleeting.

"Family" is a big deal in this setting, and so is "Innocence."

Therefore...

Humanity check type 1: to break or disobey family ties. Refusing an obligation assigned by an elder or established by tradition, harming a family member or remanding him or her to societal authorities, or

Humanity gain type 1: to conform with family standards and obligations. Favoring a kin relationship or obligation over one's personal gain or over society's demands.

Humanity check type 2: to diminish or desecrate innocence.

Humanity gain type 2: to preserve or benefit the innocent.

When these two things come together in a positive way, one might speak of the action as "especially good." In game terms, helping the innocent in a way that one's family would expect will get the character two Humanity gain rolls, not one. Similarly, desecrating or spoiling innocence, against the obligations or standards of one's family, yields two separate Humanity checks.

However, the real issue is that these two things may also come into conflict, such that one gets a Humanity check no matter what one does. Even more subtly, a single act may combine the two issues. For instance, defending an innocent who's being victimized by a family member gets a check *and* a gain, and so does defending one's family at the expense of the innocent. These situations crop up most often when the power base and cultural assumptions of a community are threatened. In these situations, a plural definition of Humanity forces a hero to generate his or her own value system that compromises or balances the elements of a given moral framework, because the fixed rules are not enough.

Most of Jack Vance's fiction concerns this issue, especially the Alastor Cluster trilogy.

Consider as well two classic stories, which, although not about sorcerers and demons, illustrate the issues nicely: *The Scarlet Letter* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. In these stories, in SORCERER terms, Humanity is affected by community standards of decorous conduct and also by "objective" stan-

dards of the obligations of marriage (which are broken even if breached in secret). In the former, Arthur Dimmesdale's sin of adultery and denial of his child causes him to "lose Humanity" even though he outwardly accords with community standards. Similarly, Sir Gawain breaches the code of hospitality and flirts with his host's wife, again "losing Humanity," although as a knight who bravely faces certain death, he accords well with community standards.

A meaty Kicker usually includes an incident that cracks open a rift between the differing definitions of Humanity, including some decision the character made about it already; the new question is whether, given the new circumstances afforded by the Kicker, he or she will continue to follow the pattern of that choice or switch to another priority.

In the voodoo-like, heavy-family setting suggested previously, some Kicker ideas might include the following:

- ▼ **The birth of a problematic child, for instance born to lovers from rival families, whose fate is handed into the character's care.**
- ▼ **A problematic sibling, whose activities bring the family much-needed resources but also higher risk from the larger society, and who enlists the character in "one last job."**

Why bring all this up in a chapter about gender and stories? Because stories with a lot of sexual judgment or relevance often include plural Humanity definitions. Also, because such a story is never so simple as, "Men have one type of Humanity and women have another." That's stupid, as stated perfectly by de Beauvoir's essay. My goal is to borrow, I hope, from her insights and to present something more sensible than a dichotomous gender-Humanity view.

DANGEROUS GROUND

Two story types (of many)

Now it's time to bring in the gender issue. I suggest that male and female story types exist, each of which contains plural Humanity issues.

The first thing to understand is that what I'm presenting are not *the* male and female story types, and frankly, they have nothing to do with Jungian or similar "archetypes." They are, instead, just two types of stories, plucked out of the myriads of potential types. They typically have male and female protagonists, respectively, but even this is not a given, and I see no reason to think that each story type "validates" the gender of the protagonist.

The second thing to understand is that in order to discuss them, they are

“shaken out” slightly – that is, as presented, they are a bit more focused and simple than most stories out there. Real stories are richer and more conjoined with other themes and story types. I have extracted (or abstracted) the issues out of real stories and presented them in isolation from their usual applications.

The third thing to understand is that these are not only stories for or about the gender they’re tagged with. Men and women are in both, and men and women can fully appreciate both. As a corollary point, gender-reversed protagonists are possible, but they are not merely substitutions; doing so has specific consequences.

On to the meat of it all, so to speak.

The “male” story type that I’m talking about concerns trade-offs among individual needs (mating, kids, self-preservation), family/kin needs, community or society needs, and “humanity at large” needs. A good example is the undercover cop who struggles between friendship with the hoods he’s lived with and the responsibilities to the overall society that he accepted as an officer of the law.

The “female” story type that I’m talking about concerns trade-offs among reproductive decisions: assessing and choosing mates, being assessed and chosen, when to have kids and when not to have them, dealing with others’ input into the topic, and similar stuff. “Power” is gained either by affirming or by denying any element or aspect of these decisions. Good examples include strength-through-motherhood stories, romantic comedies in which a woman affirms her worth and attractiveness to herself and then “lands” a man, rape-and-revenge cinema, and any stories in which a character’s power is gained in large part by withholding or denying sex, or by never maturing sexually. Incidentally, this story-type has nothing at all to do with the sexual sorcery described in the previous chapter, which is a different story type entirely. Again, both of these story types contain plural views of Humanity as discussed in the previous section.

Certain archetypal or stereotypical characterizations of men-as-violent, men-as-thinkers, or women-as-conciliators, women-as-feelers, are completely irrelevant to these two story types. Both types are highly passionate, including the protagonists making decisions in the most intolerable, wracking circumstances. Both rely heavily on relationships with many other individuals. Either may include extreme levels of violence or other graphic content,

Some say, “Well, let’s just be human and not talk about masculine or feminine at all.” People who say that imagine they are occupying the high moral ground. I say that we have to be a little gentle here, and allow the words masculine and feminine to be spoken, and not be afraid that some moral carpenter will make boxes of these words and imprison us in them.

—R. Bly, *Iron John*

or just as easily may not. Either may be very cerebral and “talky,” or just as easily may not. Either can feature a rebel or nonconformist as the hero, or just as easily may not.

Both types will be treated in detail later in the chapter, but just a couple more twists and turns need to be examined first.

Protagonist gender

When I look across all the examples of the story types throughout mythology, literature, and film, the trend is overwhelming: the typical protagonist is male for the societal story and female for the reproductive story. I don’t think this phenomenon dictates *audience* demographics, as I think almost anyone can identify with a given protagonist regardless of gender. But the protagonist-to-story-type match is definitely skewed.

Exceptions do exist, with a female hero in a societal story type or a male hero in a reproductive-power story type. It can work very well – but the switch is not trivial. It always introduces complications rather than acting as a mere so-what substitution. Here are some examples of special interest, especially since they’re hardly ever nice.

Feminized men: the male hero has been emotionally or physically forced or placed into the role of a woman, and to a great degree must adopt a female-centric outlook to discover a means of power, as the male avenues of power are denied to him. Great examples include *Madame Butterfly*, *Hedwig and the Angry Inch*, and *Farewell My Concubine*. Stories of this sort tend to be tragic or bittersweet, as the hero is rarely fully successful.

Man as outsider: the male hero is “trapped” in a reproductive-power story, and most of the conflict concerns his horror at and denial of the issue’s significance in his life. These stories are often pure horror-tales, such as *Eraserhead*, and even the classics are often grotesque, as seen in the fate of Dimmesdale.

Rape-and-revenge: the female hero is faced with a reproductive violation of the worst sort, but her primary conflict is how to conduct redress given society’s bounds and standards. Solutions range widely – in some cases, she rejects society to enact justice, whereas in others, society’s standards are just, but many internal forces and hypocrisies make the process of redress slow at best. Not surprisingly, such stories are incredibly stressful and tend to provoke harsh, troubled reactions from audiences. *I Spit on Your Grave* would be the top contender for this billing.

The woman warrior: the female hero puts aside her sexual life (and possibly even her sexual identity) in favor of obligations to society. In times of political turmoil, though, the social ties become blurry and problematic, and thus come into direct conflict with new opportunities for love and love-

making. This character makes for a great story if the issues are raised and dealt with, rather than swept under the rug. Jessica Amanda Salmonson's *Tomoe Gozen* trilogy is nearly unique in modern fantasy for having the guts to address them openly.

Cross-dressed play

Another sort of gender-switching arises in the role-playing context: men playing female characters, and women playing male characters. Several interpretations have been kicked around about these phenomena since the hobby began, and no real conclusions have emerged yet.

One line of thinking suggests that it's a non-issue – no different, and with the same aesthetic difficulties, from a male or female writer or film-director making decisions about differently-gendered protagonists in his or her stories. A given creator simply does it well or badly, and that's the end of the issue.

Other lines of thinking have been raised, especially regarding players whose characters are *always* of the opposite gender. Some ideas about this include:

- ▼ Some men tend to play female characters in order to express themes of alienation and helplessness, as they perceive women protagonists to yield more striking statements regarding these issues. For a mind-bender, see Carol Clover's *Men, Women, and Chainsaws* for a great treatise on the phenomenon of male identification with female protagonists in B-movies.
- ▼ Less nobly, some men tend to play female characters as a prurient means of fantasizing about women – basically, as a mode of public masturbation.
- ▼ Some women tend to play male characters to gain access to power, as they perceive male protagonists to be able to do things that women are denied, either in reality or in terms of the prevailing standards within that particular play-group.
- ▼ Some women tend to play male characters in order to avoid the dysfunctional play described in Chapter 1.

Most of this supplement is written from the non-issue perspective. However, the rather twisty other possibilities are out there, and they surely could have an impact on playing the sorts of stories I'm describing. Clearly just what that means for a given, individual play group will have to be handled locally. All manner of complications or local variations are going to be involved, and the debates continue to rage – oddly enough, in the *SORCERER* forums on more than one occasion.

MALE STORY

This story model is based on the idea that people must often trade off among priorities regarding whom they will help. It's usually impossible to act to the benefit of every single person that one's actions affect, and trying to cope with these trade-offs is a source of conflict.

Morality and social life

The diagram of concentric circles or zones represents ways in which people help and value other people. The innermost circle is one's own well-being, one's romantic/sexual contacts and commitments, and one's children. The circle right outside that is one's kin: siblings, cousins, and parents.

The next circle out concerns reciprocity – doing stuff in ways that tend to rebound on oneself favorably, along socially-acknowledged modes. It's directed toward groups:

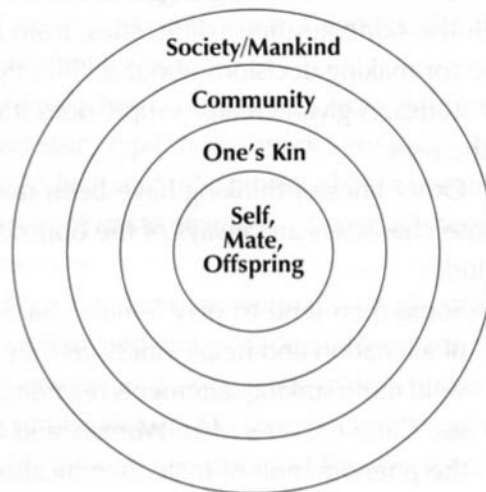
things like political alliances, ethnic membership, religious institutions, social action groups, terrorist organizations, whatever. Both oppression and activism against oppression fall into this zone.

Finally, the outermost circle concerns interactions with those one does not know or does not perceive oneself to know. Actions concerning ties of this sort (if they may be called ties at all) include "good Samaritan" actions and, conversely, "terrorist" actions.

The four zones in the diagram represent how one directs one's attention and energy. Think of each zone as containing potential ties to those people. The two outer zones are a little different, in that a single tie in either of these is weaker than a single tie in the inner two. However, the cumulative effect of many ties and extraordinary circumstances for a given tie can override this trend.

Some actions reinforce ties in more than one zone at once, such that one (say) helps one's kin and the community simultaneously. The internal sense of justification regarding these actions is extraordinarily powerful. Most "self-sacrificing" activities are like this, corresponding to ties at the social-

No one can be a super man! No one!
—K. O'Neill and P. Mills, *Marshal Law*





alliance zone *in concert with* ties in the kin zone.

Unfortunately, life does not afford us the luxury of these concerns always being compatible, and conflicts among them arise all the time. These conflicts may occur *entirely within* a single zone, e.g., my uncle vs. my brother, or my life vs. my child's life. They may also occur *among* zones, e.g., my marriage vs. what my family thinks of my spouse. Facing and resolving these issues composes one part of what we call moral or immoral. If you're interested in the technical background for the diagram, check out *The Biology of Moral Systems* by Richard Alexander; I've modified his presentation to a degree.

Since no one particular zone is "the good one," and since conflicts among them arise constantly, humans are very attentive, very confused, and very negotiatory creatures. Stories which address these kinds of conflicts are, by definition, dramatic. That's what drama *is*, the lack of a clear-cut right and wrong. In SORCERER terms, this means that Humanity might be gained by attention to any of the zones, and it might be lost due to sacrificing any of them as well. Therefore conflicting demands across the zones may lead to Humanity gain rolls and Humanity checks for single actions.

Cinema offers some of the purest and most wracking versions of this sort of story, especially many westerns, war stories, gangster flicks of whatever decade, and more. In most of these stories, the protagonist is a man.

Actual play

Whew! What a bunch of pinhead academics, eh? Taking it into our humble hobby, what's the point? It's all about posing conflicts and resolving them, specifically, what GMs and players must actually do, and how story-endings are brought into being.

The GM's job, for this sort of story, is to present the ties or bonds within and across the zones as clearly as possible. Therefore the setting is key, as expressed by NPCs' actions, customs, concerns, and rationalizations. If the relationship-map technique is being used, then getting it understood by every-

one at the table is a priority; play does not concern “figuring out the map” so much as seeing it and realizing that the troubles are just beginning.

The basic conflicts are pretty easy, though.

- ▼ Pick any one zone and oppose two components within it. Examples: brother vs. brother; ethic group vs. economic class.
- ▼ Pick any two zones and increase the obligations represented by each one. Examples: helping one’s clan vs. helping an erring sibling; helping a stranger vs. helping one’s clan.

The player’s job is to address the moral challenges through the character’s decisions. It doesn’t matter whether the player makes these decisions “from the heart” (such that the character represents the player’s point of view) or from the character who has been deliberately built to differ from the player. Either way is fine. Kickers for such stories could well include some history regarding the issue. For instance, a hero might already have sworn and demonstrated allegiance to a given baron, and the Kicker puts pressure on this relationship by introducing, say, a family member who’s broken the baron’s laws.

As play progresses, shifting among zones becomes the primary story consideration: by definition, the hero arrives at a personal solution to a proposed conflict of interest within and across the four zones. This is the classic male-warrior story.

Endings deserve some attention, as they range very widely in terms of how well or badly things turn out for everyone, across the whole community. In the simplest version, everything works out, and the apparent contradiction among the zones is healed. The more developed or disturbing version can be quite grim, as something of value at one circle must be abandoned or sacrificed in favor of another.

A male story of this type fitted into SORCERER terms is presented in Chapter 4. Again, for such a story to work well, a little care towards setting preparation and “color” goes a long way.

FEMALE STORY

This story model is based on the idea that sexuality and reproduction are a source of power. They are divided into stages and applications, each with a whole arena of activity and conflict, as listed on the table with a few examples. For each stage or set of reproductive activity, think of a person being able either to affirm (basically, to do) that set of things, or to reject or deny doing it.

	Affirmation	Rejection
Maturation	Come to sexual maturity	Never grow up
Attracting a sexual partner	Look good, take risks, be good at things	Self-efface
Competing with rivals	Displays, confrontations	Wallflower
Judging potential partners	Pick a partner from those available	Tease without choosing, or detach from the game
Establishing commitment	Trading high school rings, getting engaged or married	Lying, leading on
Sexual contact, copulation	Just what it says	Preserve virginity, withhold access, celibacy
Fertilization	Just what it says	Birth control, castration
Fidelity issues	Prevent partner from cheating, abstain from cheating	Get away with cheating
Gestation	Carry the child, or provide for pregnant mate	Miscarriage, abortion, or getting a surrogate parent
Birth	Give birth	Surrogate birth, stillbirth
Nurturing, parenting	Teach, nourish, or protect the child	Infanticide, child abuse, abandonment

Stages and steps of reproduction

That's the tricky part: in a story of this type, power is gained *either* by confirming *or* by rejecting a specific row on the table. Lady Macbeth is doing the latter; by denying multiple rows on the table (sexual contact, fertilization, and nurturing, as she directly states), she is generating mystic power for her fell purpose. Ripley, in *Aliens*, is doing the former; when she says, "Get away from her, you bitch!" she is affirming the nurturing row. (Notice that the behavior is what matters; it doesn't matter at all that the child is not biologically hers). Any aspect of sex and reproduction can be seen as a mighty engine, either turned toward its usual end or converted toward another end entirely.

A quick note: don't dichotomize affirmation and rejection on the table into "good" and "bad." Some of the

... Come, you spirits
That tend on mortal thoughts, unsex me
here,
And fill me, from the crown to toe, top-full
Of direst cruelty! Make thick my blood;
Stop up the access and passage to remorse,
That no compunctious visitings of nature
Shake my fell purpose nor keep peace
between
The effect and it! Come to my woman's
breasts
And take my milk for gall, you murd'ring
ministers,
Wherever in your sightless substances
You wait on nature's mischief!

—W. Shakespeare, *Macbeth*



Brandi November Lyons

acts described may be easily judged as such, but few if any of the overall categories can be, and each cell may contain very different actions.

One's sexual life is dynamic! It's constantly changing, constantly redefining instances of effort and conflict. Tons of threats or circumstances arise to thwart people's aims in all the cells of the table: men are involved, other women are involved, and children are involved, all of whom contribute their own agendas and difficulties

to the situation. People tend to lie and mislead others, rivals tend to get in the way, and potential partners tend to have ideas and goals that conflict with one's own.

Two of the most serious and attention-grabbing conflicts that might arise are rape and incest. Each can be seen as a violation (rejection) of multiple rows at once. They are also perceived as highly negative events because the targeted person is necessarily harmed and his or her choices in life are reduced by the event, which is to say, these acts are grossly exploitative. The targeted person is being deprived of sexuality as a source of personal, potentially positive power.

I bring up these painful issues because it's here that the plural Humanity of this story type emerges in full force. One may incur Humanity gain rolls by "taking back" one's sexuality, but incur Humanity checks by the very same actions, as they almost certainly include punishing or retaliating against the perpetrator. It's even more difficult if a child has been conceived – is its existence a good thing or a bad thing? Philosophy sputters to a halt when confronted by such issues. A deontological, qualities-based perspective on these matters is over-simplistic; a utilitarian, outcomes-based one quickly becomes self-indulgent. We have to fall back on creating stories.

A full literature and film review for these stories, both for protagonists and for creators, is way beyond the scope of this supplement. A few of the most familiar heroes are Medea, Boadicea, Clytemnestra, the Wife of Bath, Ripley, and Dorothy. Both innocence and ruthlessness have great value in these stories; contrast Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* with the main character

in *Dangerous Liaisons*, for instance, or check out *La Femme Nikita* for a combination. Even more enlightening is a quick look at the Dark Side: characters like the Lady deWinter, Circe, Morgana le Fay, Maleficent, Lady Macbeth, and the Wicked Witch of the West have instant, visceral appeal – male villains, even great ones like Darth Vader, only occasionally attain such heights.

Another issue concerns “Voice,” which is to say, whether the characters actually speak about the sacrifices or focus for their choices about these things. I’m not sure why, but female sorcerers are rarely given voice in classical literature; Medea and Lady Macbeth are the only two who come to mind, and neither is immediately acceptable to all audiences as a protagonist. More often the powerful woman with a voice is the antagonist, like the Wicked Witch of the West.

Actual play

This story type isn’t for everyone. A female character’s uterus, ovaries, vagina, and so on are unquestionably present in the game content, even if they all remain clothed. Barbie-type characters simply won’t work; they are instantly revealed as the space-filling constructs they are.

It’s also more difficult to play than the male one, because it’s so dynamic. The emotional connections across multiple characters keep changing and reversing, but the degree of these connections steadily increases. The standard role-playing fixed-plot scenario, offering one problem, a few maps and set-pieces, and a villain to be stopped, is wholly inadequate for this purpose, and playing such scenarios is tantamount to denying this story type from the group experience.

The GM’s job comes straight out of the back-story, to play the shifting decisions, the agendas, and the participation of the NPCs very aggressively. Setting is irrelevant, really – it sets certain idioms like standards for marriage or decorous conduct, but the issues are rock-bottom human things that apply just about anywhere and anywhen.

The players’ job is, as always, to work aggressively from the Kickers, but in this case especially, reassessing a given character’s outlook continually during play, and being willing to change it based on new information, is a big deal. Every section, effectively, might yield a new player-authored Kicker for each character, in the sense that the old one keeps changing its shape.

Just as with the male story type, endings for this story type vary a great deal in terms of how it turns out for others besides the protagonists. Whether the hero succeeds is one thing; just how much grief, gore, and ruin has occurred is another. This story type ranks among the most extreme and potentially-horrifying, yet also the most affirming and triumphant stories among all human story-telling. A romantic comedy like *Pretty Woman* or *My Big Fat*

Brandi November Lyons



Greek Wedding tends to have “things” work out for everyone except perhaps for one annoying person, whereas uncompromising ruin-fests like *Dangerous Liaisons* or *I Spit on Your Grave* can leave audience members dialing their therapists’ numbers with trembling fingers.

A female scenario of this type ‘ported into SORCERER terms is presented in Chapter 3. One useful point is that the

reproductive table is way too diverse to be used as is; it should be “squashed” into combined rows, or perhaps certain rows will be irrelevant.

APPLICATION TO SORCERER

Few role-playing games have addressed any of these issues. The usual option is to consider male and female protagonists to be complete and total equivalents, which to me seems like a laudable goal (avoiding sexism) but a disastrous method (denial and removal of the “sexual energy” of play). Some role-playing games that have dipped a toe in deeper water without being chauvinist or adolescent about it include *Zero*, *Orkworld*, *Hero Wars*, *Castle Falkenstein*, and *Violence Future*.

So how might SORCERER get story-gendered, at least in terms of the two types described here? Let me count the ways.

The sorcerer as hero

Both of the story types carry some themes that are expressed over and over, across cinema, theater, mythology, and literature. One of the conclusions to be drawn from the male story type is that there are no true outsiders. No matter which zone is favored or which is sacrificed, the hero is involved – especially the maverick, alienated loner, given contact with the society for any length of time. Also, one of the conclusions to be drawn from the female story type is that power over (or deriving from) fertility and childbirth is overwhelmingly effective, to the point of trumping other standards for right and wrong.

SORCERER, as a game, throws the whole concept of “theme” into a highly charged metaphor: Binding a demon.

The strongest mechanic in the game for defining the protagonist is the often-overlooked Price, which is to say, what the character has sacrificed so far in his or her history, directly or indirectly, for the access to power represented by sorcery. This Price can also be factored directly into the character's Kicker, which may either confirm or challenge the validity of that sacrifice.

In terms of the two story types, it's really easy – what zones of the four-zone diagram have been diminished? Or, what rows on the reproductive table have been denied? Framing the two story types into this metaphor gets into scary places, very fast. Consider the four most basic interpretations of the two types, and just some of the possibilities.

A female hero in a female story type discovers her reproductive power in the midst of turmoil – she Binds a demon into her body to replace a lost child; she uses demons to destroy romantic rivals; she shunts all of her reproductive potential into the demon (sterilizing herself) in order to find True Love.

A male hero in a male story type is a loner drawn into community trouble – he rebels against a corrupt regime by beginning a cult based on worshipping a demon; he battles lawbreakers using demons whose Needs themselves foment injustice; he serves a government using demons who cut him off from everyone he's close to.

A male hero in a female story type must take on an uncharacteristic ownership of reproduction – (the obvious one) he mates with a demon in order to gestate a child of his own; he Binds a Passing demon to be an heir to his fortune and status; he uses demon-derived physical and social advantages to achieve dizzying amounts of sexual contact.

A female hero in a male story type must justify her “place” and her personal critique of society's mores – she enters into an honor-challenge duel with the realm's greatest warrior, using his death as a sacrifice for Summoning a powerful demon to protect the realm; she Binds the ghost of her slain child as an Object demon, in the form of her personal weapon; she defies the government in order to preserve her sister's children from harm, Banishing the assassin-demons which are so crucial to the government's stability.

Sorcery and rituals

Lore is another rules-feature that people tend to gloss over and therefore miss a whole realm of conflict and story potential. The main question is, what sort of relationships are involved in a character's Lore? That might sound

funny, until you consider that relationships are necessary in order to learn anything. The Lore sector of the diagram on the back of the character sheet certainly ought to include a few names. These relationships can be cast into the framework of either story type.

Rituals' features and circumstances are another useful play-consideration, especially because proving any color or content to them at all is good for often-crucial bonus dice. In some ways, each ritual can be perceived as a mini-Price in action, expressing some feature of the Humanity issues at stake. In the case of the two story types, though, one may consider not only what is being challenged or violated, but also what is being affirmed.

Binding is the core ritual of the game, and therefore it's good to consider just what a given demon-Binding is being performed "in the name of." In the male story type, which zone is deemed to benefit from the Binding? In the female story type, which reproductive stage?

A SORCERER, A DEMON, AND A RITUAL

In 1650, a young Austrian nobleman has seen his family and lands utterly ruined by the Thirty Years War. The recent Peace of Westphalia has accomplished nothing for them. During the war, at great personal and spiritual risk, he Summoned and Bound a powerful demon devoted to the family's well-being. Only his sorcery has kept the estates and people alive at all.

Now, however, he has fallen in love with a woman from the opposite side – indeed, a detestable Lutheran, the daughter of the Swedish military leader Gustavus Adolphus, who had ravaged this very land twenty years before. He has married her in secret.

All right, so much for pageantry. Here he is, facing off with the demon, who has discovered the marriage and is now fully ready to rend the woman into bits, and the clear option for him is to hit it with a Punish it'll never forget. He sets up the classic hours-long ritual, taking care to include objects of great family value like the centuries-old family crest and the documents of Papal Blessing earned during the war, and carries it out in the old cemetery, where all his ancestors lie. The ritual itself desecrates all these things.

A SORCERESS, A DEMON, AND A RITUAL

In 1960s Japan, a young woman faced marriage with an unwanted suitor, a man she knew to be corrupt. She Bound a demon by sacrificing to it her sexual maturity, and effectively any reproductive stage after that. She remained, then, perpetually twelve years old, with the demon itself express-

ing any and all of her potential sexual hungers and priorities as its Desire and Need.

But all that was a century ago. Times change, and now, she has found someone she could love, who has demonstrated all those qualities she thought were just myths. She re-defines the Binding, carrying it out all over again to reverse the effect, making the demon a pre-teen girl. She sets up the ritual to enact, with her new lover, all the things she has missed over the decades, transforming as she goes into a fully-mature woman.

Demons

What demons are like, and what they want, are also nicely definable in terms of the story type, especially their Needs and Desires. To review, a Need is something that the sorcerer is obliged to provide, directly or indirectly, for the demon, on a regular basis, whereas a Desire is the demon's general agenda, applicable to (as it sees it) any circumstances. Both put pressure on the sorcerer because they make the demon an active, interested participant in anything the sorcerer does, or anywhere he or she goes, or anyone he or she interacts with.

HOXOR, the family guardian

Inconspicuous (appears as a huge, ferocious beast, but usually it's invisible)

Telltale: dry, fiery smell

Stamina 6, Will 7, Lore 6, Power 7

Desire: Power, **Need:** re-affirmation of family commitment

Abilities: Perception (threat to family, confers via visions), Link, Travel (moves through solid objects), Big, Special Damage, Daze

HEIKO, the sublimated sex-drive

Passer (a sensuous woman)

Telltale: absolutely blemishless skin, over-glossy hair, always-modulated voice

Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5

Desire: Sensual gratification, **Need:** long, emotional discussions

Abilities: Cloak, Perception (heightened physical sensation, confers to other), Hint, Armor (damage penetrates but has little effect)

That's just scratching the surface, though. Consider the "inner demons" concept from *THE SORCERER'S SOUL*, and ask, why would a player want his or her sorcerer character to be Bound to a male or female demon? I've always used "it" as the pronoun for demons, in part to express that they are not real beings, but certainly many demons display aspects or features of maleness or femaleness. What's that about? Are demons an expression of one's self, an extension, so to speak, of one's efforts to get what one wants? Or can a demon be an expression of the desired thing itself, functioning, in a weird way, actually as a rival or substitute for what one wants?

Here's a final thought that underlies both story types and enhances the demon metaphor at the most basic level. I was once asked whether Binding was something like prostitution, in light of the Needs and the general concept of the demon-as-thing, not a person. I immediately answered, Yes. I specified that, by definition, the sorcerer was the "john," regardless of gender and regardless of what sexual acts, if any, were involved in the Binding. This answer led to another question: "In that case, who's the bitch?" Ah, I said. To answer that, you play the game.

Testimonial

Among my brothers, two of them gamed together constantly before inviting my other brother and myself into the game. ... With my brothers, my female character was basically a neutered male.

Our last dungeon crawl ended unfinished. It had ended, in fact, with our characters having been teleported (or whatever) out of the dungeon into a clearing without our weapons, money or clothes. At the end of the run, we'd talked about having to walk naked to the next town and see what we could do to re-outfit ourselves to go back into the dungeon.

I'd said something about walking with dignity: "Heads held high, hands held low." The GM corrected me, telling me that in my case that wouldn't work.

By that time I'd seen my share of National Geographics and Nova specials – I knew that in cultures where clothing was minimal, women didn't bother to cover their breasts, but often did wear loincloths. And my character was a ranger, fahcrissake. She could certainly have done something with reeds and animal skins. But no, the GM had spoken and left, making his comment the last word on the matter.

And that was our last run, ever. I don't know if they were growing tired of [that system] in general, or if the GM just didn't want to pick up the game again, given the fact that he had a naked, vulnerable female in a party that had to figure out how to get a fair amount of money in a relatively short period of time. Especially since the female character was played by his sister, and he himself was still pretty adolescent, his self-evaluation notwithstanding.



Chapter Three:

IN UTERO

This chapter presents a fully-developed role-playing scenario based on the "female" story concept presented in Chapter 2. I ran it as a convention demo scenario, no less than seven times for different groups of people in four days, at GenCon 2002.

SORCERER is a rotten game for con demos, because it's hard for people to establish ownership of characters when they haven't written the Kickers themselves. They tend to look up and down the character sheets in a sort of host-a-murder, play-my-assigned-part way, rather than seize their rights as authors. My solution was to create the world's sim-

Her face was the same, white and soft, the pale lips slightly parted, but he saw madness staring out of her eyes. He couldn't have said how he knew, for he had never seen or known a person even slightly mentally disturbed, but this was madness, stark and real and awful. It was as if a demon sat inside there and looked out of her eyes. And at the same time it was [a goddess's] look he saw, remote, predated civilization, heedless of morality.

—R. Rendell, *The Bridesmaid*

plest relationship map, and unlike the NPC-driven maps presented in *THE SORCERER'S SOUL*, simply to embed the characters into it. This technique has a "create your own ending to *this story*" feel. It loses some of the game's strengths in order to focus on the strengths that can be shown in a brief exposure, namely the Humanity rules and the power to create a theme through decisions during play.

In terms of the swimming pool analogy, we've moved wholly into the water and are swimming toward the deep end. Most of the attention is being given to the imaginative content. We're still at the surface, though – don't lose sight of the fact that real people are producing this content and that their interactions matter.

THE SCENARIO

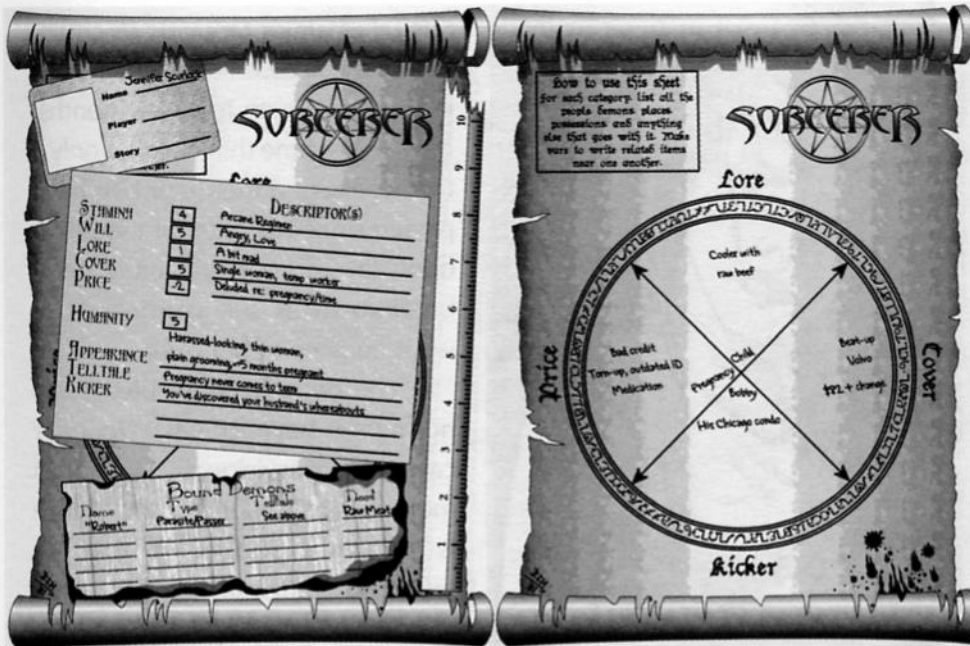
Who's there

Three player-characters are involved: Robert Scurlock, Jennifer Scurlock, and their embryonic son, Lucien. Two demons are present: a Passing demon who looks like Jennifer, who's Bound by and carrying the real infant son; a Passing/Parasite demon who looks like the infant son, who's Bound by and carried by the real Jennifer. A final NPC character is Stephanie, Robert's current girlfriend.

Ten years ago, a young graduate student named Robert Scurlock and his new wife Jennifer conducted a sorcerous ritual. Robert's academic inquiries had taken a bemused detour to the crackpot fringe into an obsession with insanely fascinating insights, and Jennifer's pregnancy offered an opportunity to try out real sorcery. It wasn't as frivolous as it sounds; Jennifer had suffered a near-miscarriage and the couple were determined not to lose the child. Well, they conducted a combined Contact and Summons ritual, and it all went wrong: Robert woke up, sick and injured, to find his wife missing. He did not know that his wife now carried a demon in her womb, and that his and Jennifer's son was now a fetus in the womb of a Passing demon.

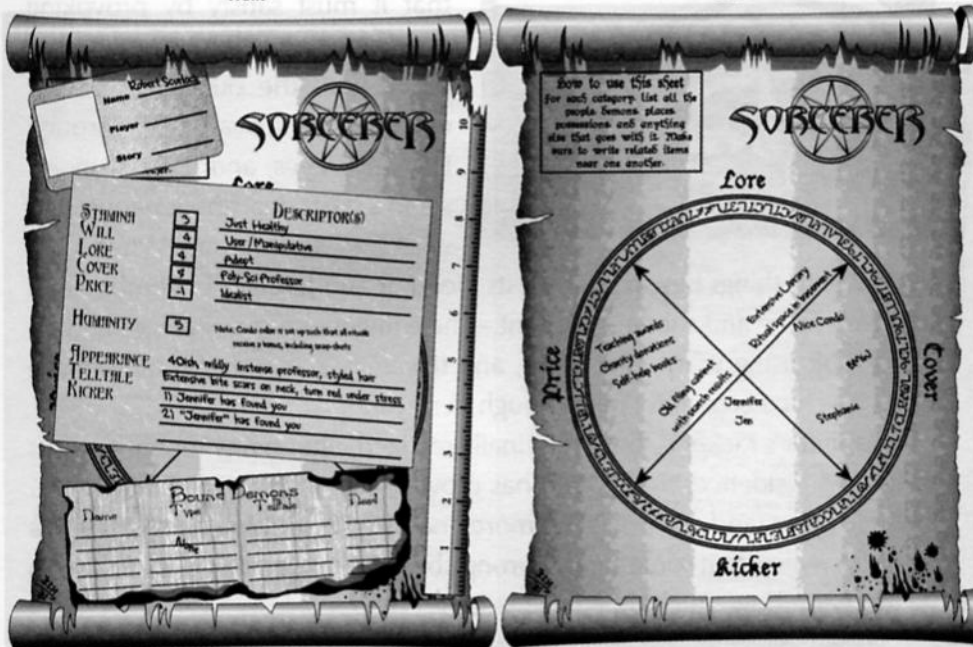
In game terms, Jennifer has Bound the demon she carries, and the human fetus has Bound the demon who carries him.

After the fiasco, Robert searched for Jennifer for four years, but eventually gave up. Since then, he became a professor of political science and is now a tenured, well-respected member of academia at a large university. Now, a decade since the fateful night, he has an expensive and tasteful condominium apartment, teaching awards framed on his wall, and a new Lexus. His old sorcerous stuff is all under tarps in the condo's extremely locked and secure basement, along with the files and records that he accumulated while searching for Jennifer. Robert never re-married or even had a long-term



Front

Back



Front

Back

girlfriend, but recently, he has become romantically involved with a woman fifteen years younger than he: Stephanie, his star graduate student.

Meanwhile, Jennifer has been searching for Robert, but not very competently. She doesn't quite realize that all this time has passed, partly because she's disoriented mentally and partly because the demonic pregnancy shifts and changes, reverting to perhaps three months' worth every so often. She has traveled all around the United States, not always aware of where she is.



She takes temporary or low-inquiry jobs like nail technician or waitressing, and drifts on in a few months, most of the time thinking that only a few weeks or a month or two have passed since the night of the ritual, often stressed to the point of near-breakdown as she worries about what became of her husband.

The demon in her uterus has no name beyond what Jennifer calls him provisionally, which is most often "Robert." Its Desire is Sensation, specifically keeping safe and warm exactly where it is. Beyond the craving for raw meat that it must satisfy by provoking Jennifer, it usually doesn't bother much with the outside world ... except that it can see through Jennifer's eyes, and it does understand a great deal about people and what they do and want. When it has

to deal with things beyond getting its Need, it and Jennifer in combination are a fearsome and subtle opponent – she can get into many places and do quite a bit using Warp and Cloak, and the demon can do brutal damage using Psychic Force and Link, through her eyes.

Jennifer's Kicker is that she's finally realized, after many repetitive visits to her old residence, that Robert has moved, and she's figured out where. Every so often, and accumulating more and more disturbing details, she has begun to realize that something is wrong about her pregnancy, although she's still fuzzy on how much time has passed.

Lucien, the child currently in the body of the Jennifer-like Passing demon, is a full player-character too, and an accomplished sorcerer. Based on my demo experiences, the first thing the players ask, in shock, is "How do ya play a fetus?" Which fortunately is easily answered. It's been ten years. Although in size the fetus is at about six month's development, he's actually developed much closer to term than that, and in some ways well beyond. Ten years is a lot of time to look through the demon's eyes using Link and to learn more about the world. The child does know that he's contained in another person's body, and that people do move about and interact with one

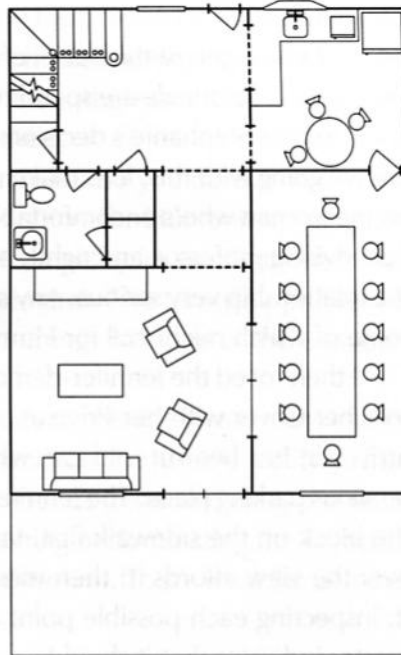
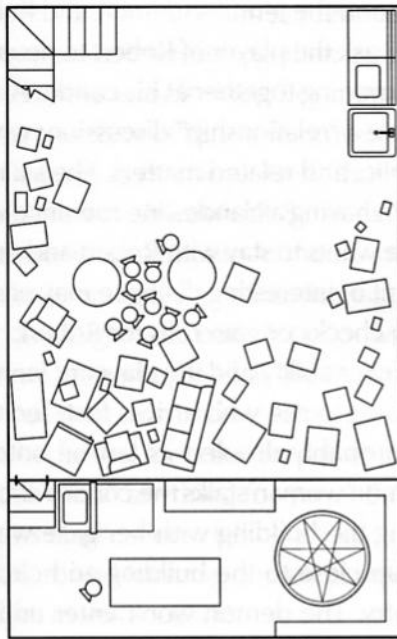


As far as “doing” things is concerned, the child may influence his demon much like a Parasite demon influences its host: with a Will vs. Will roll. If the roll is successful, the demon simply moves and acts as he desires, with a rough 1:1 correspondence between the victories of the successful roll and the number of distinct actions taken, perhaps grading that correspondence down if the actions contradict the demon’s Desire or Need. One of its most important abilities is Travel, in the sense that it can “show up” right near or in front of a person whom it knows. To the person, it’s as if the demon had just walked around the corner or was already in the room he or she entered. The range of this ability is about the size of a football field.

The child’s Kicker is that he’s picked up enough information to realize (a) that he should be born by now and (b) that he has a “father,” that is, another parent, somewhere. Two parents sounds like a good thing to him. By prompting the Jennifer-demon, he’s managed to get it to research Robert’s whereabouts, which, as it turns out, suits the demon fine.

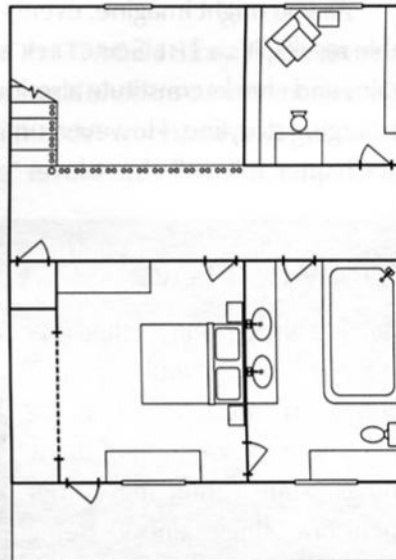
To summarize the characters’ knowledge and outlooks:

- ▼ Robert does not know that Jennifer is even still alive, much less that she carries a demon-fetus in her body. Nor does he know that the Jennifer-demon exists or that she carries his son.
- ▼ Jennifer knows that the baby should be born, although whether “by now” gets added to that concept is a little sketchy.
- ▼ The fetus, or real child, knows that he should be born by now, and he looks forward to having two parents.
- ▼ The Jennifer-demon wants Robert’s love and commitment, and she knows that remaining pregnant with his child is her strongest asset.
- ▼ The fetus-demon wants to stay safe, warm, and protected.



Robert's condo floor plans:
basement (above left), first floor
(above right) and second floor (right)

- ▼ Stephanie is less complex than any of the other characters. She wants an above-board, secure relationship with Robert, and eventually to get married. How she reacts to revelations concerning Robert's past is not pre-determined for play purposes. (Stephanie has Stamina 3, athletic regime; Will 4, belief system; Lore 0; Cover 4, graduate student, and Humanity 4.)



Almost ready

Before play, take some time to review the character sheets with everyone present (the more the players know about one another's characters, the better). Explain how the diagram on the back works – elements of the characters' four listed scores have interactions, and their physical positions on the diagram represent the closeness of those interactions. Also make sure that everyone understands what a "user" of a demon ability is, and who the user is for each ability.

Now for the scenario: both Jennifer and the Jennifer-demon find Robert on the same night. At the outset of play, I ask the player of Robert to describe how he and Stephanie are spending an evening together at his condo. As the GM, I initiate Stephanie's decision to have a "relationship" discussion: where are we going with this, let's make it public, and related matters. She's a nice young woman who's uncomfortable with having a clandestine romance with her advising professor, and rightly so. She wants to stay with Robert and make the relationship very serious. Any amount of interesting dialogue may ensue, some of which might call for Humanity checks or gain rolls for Robert.

I then rolled the Jennifer-demon's Cover ability and the player of Jennifer rolls her Cover with her Price as a penalty, to see who arrives first. Jennifer arrives in her beat-up old car, which probably drooled its last oil onto its previous parking place. The Jennifer-demon woman stalks the condo: circling the block on the sidewalk first, targeting the building with her gaze whenever the view affords it; then moving up close to the building and circling it, inspecting each possible point of entry. The demon won't enter until its master indicates that it should.

As you might imagine, events run rapidly from there, with some remarkable results. It's a THE SORCERER'S SOUL type of scenario in which Humanity gains and checks constitute a serious part of the ongoing game mechanics and emerging storyline. However, unlike the crazed transgressive stuff described in Chapter 1, it's all about love.

TOO MUCH LOVE

William Shakespeare called love "many-splendored," but a cold-eyed fellow like me calls it "multivariate." Both of us are saying that the word is an intersection of many things, some conflicting, rather than one single entity. Being attracted to another person, discovering they are attracted to you, establishing a relationship between the two, establishing that relationship to other people, making love, staying faithful, breaking faith with one person to be with another, giving up personal benefit to help the other person, harming

It was in a moment we were together
The murder took place
Without any weapon
It took place between the moments
In no time

It was a moment
Between two thoughts
When the murder took place
Without any weapons

I wasn't sure which one of us was killed

—S. Shepard and J. Chaikin, *Savage/Love*

or standing against others to preserve the relationship, having children, linking economic interests together, caring for children, caring for parents ... no one of these is itself "love," or more accurately, the word is used for any of them regardless of its use for any of the others.

The key is not "love itself," but rather "what do you do with it," which boils down to the default SORCERER definition for Humanity: regard for other humans as entities in their own right, empathy for their concerns, and the desire to avoid or minimize emotional harm. The terrifying problem is that one might well put a lot of power and energy into one of these aspects of love, yet perhaps fail at the others.

But even worse is over-idealized love, which fails at an even more crucial level because it lacks the empathetic element. It is the horrific reality of True Love: "I'll do anything for you." Sure, it sounds good and fine, but think over its applications: killing a rival, imprisoning or dominating the object of affection, and harming oneself as proof of devotion. That's what the demons are like in this scenario.

Steps and stages of love-sorcery

The sorcery of the scenario is straight out of the "Female Story Type" section in Chapter 2. Basically, some element of the established commitment ("love") has to have been subverted or sacrificed in order to enhance some other element. Robert and Jennifer "did anything" for their love, which at the time meant preserving the potential life of their child, in the context of their marriage.

It helps to break it down into three loves at work: (1) having sex in anticipation of or at least willing to risk having a child, (2) bearing the child, which is restricted to the mother, and (3) birthing the child, which brings it back into a shared issue for both parents. Clearly, this breakdown represents a limited and partly-combined subset of the full reproductive table in Chapter 2.

Again, in theory, all three of these things reinforce one another, but in reality, people

I saw him watching me in the gilded mirrors with the assessing eye of the connoisseur inspecting horseflesh, or even of a housewife in the market, inspecting cuts on the slab. I'd never seen, or else had never acknowledged, that regard of his before, the sheer carnal avarice of it; and it was strangely magnified by the monocle lodged in his left eye. When I saw him look at me with lust, I dropped my eyes but, in glancing away from him, I caught sight of myself in the mirror. And I saw myself, suddenly, as he saw me ... I saw how much that cruel necklace became me. And for the first time in my innocent and confined life, I sensed in myself a potentiality for corruption that took my breath away.

—A. Carter, *The Bloody Chamber*

often trade off among them. That trade-off is “demonized” in this scenario. In *SORCERER* terms, Robert and Jennifer inserted a Price into the second step, which now represents sorcerous power or influence, as manifested in the Bindings and the demons’ Power scores. The pregnancies represent the transitional phase into the final stage, which is determined by how Robert and Jennifer act toward the child, most especially in reference to the demons mixed up in the situation.

Love in action	The action	The ritual
For one another	Sex, which in this case includes fertilization	Contact + Summons
For the potential child [co-opted for sorcery]	Pregnancies	Bindings
For the child	Birth(s)	Whatever they do in the scenario

During play, one important nuance is perfect for out-of-game discussion: how complicit Jennifer was in the original ritual, and exactly what she and Robert did. It’s especially strong to take a break from play, discuss it a bit, then play the original ritual as a flashback, including the rolls. This provides some great bonuses for rolled-over victories from ten years before, and it’s a good opportunity to set up lines and veils for later in the scenario. (The role-playing game *Theatrix* introduced flashbacks as a present-moment-affecting mechanical element to the hobby.)

Since there are so many Telltales to spot among the characters, the best moment for this discussion and the flashbacks is when every character has realized that the condo is full of demons, and when everyone is at least suspicious that the human family is distributed somewhat unusually across the mommies.

Another useful way for a player to contribute to the scenario’s back-story is to have Robert’s player describe the long-unused sorcerous trappings in the basement. My little house rule for the scenario is that rituals conducted in this basement do not suffer from a snap-shot penalty; in other words, even as single actions, they use the full dice as listed in the Sorcery Chart in the main book.

Finally, the group should understand that they may extend or expand the time-scale of the climactic resolution. In other words, it doesn’t have to “telescope down” to a round-by-round combat scene which resolves everything. If it does, fine, but conceivably the characters could engage in a day-long ritual instead, which would be just as good.

Specialized descriptors

If a group desired to play **SORCERER** with an overwhelming focus on these sorts of issues, the following set of descriptors would frame the characters well. The rules for combining them differ from those in the main rulebook.

WILL

- ▼ **Cheater:** the character tends to conduct sexual interactions with more than one person at a time.
- ▼ **Devoted:** the character is committed to the well-being of his or her partners as well as to continuing of the relationship.
- ▼ **Romantic:** the character values the concept of "love" and "relationships" as abstractions, seeing the people involved, including himself or herself, as expressions of these principles.

Any of these may be taken singly or combined with any other in a pair, regardless of the Will score. Therefore six possible descriptors are available to any character: Cheater, Devoted, Romantic, Cheater + Romantic, Cheater + Devoted, Romantic + Devoted.

Cheater + Romantic indicates a "free spirit in love with love," Cheater + Devoted indicates (for instance) a committed spouse with an equally-committed lover on the side, and Romantic + Devoted indicates the classic Perfect Marriage sort of approach. Note that none of the six possible descriptors indicate that the character typically succeeds in realizing his or her outlook.

LORE

- ▼ **Celibate:** the character derives sorcerous power and understanding by channelling sexual energy away from sexual activity; this descriptor does not necessarily indicate that the character has never experienced such activity.
- ▼ **Wanton:** the character derives sorcerous power and understanding from frequent and energetic sexual interactions.
- ▼ **Psycho:** the character suffers from the "over-idealized love" problem described earlier, to the extent that it hampers his or her daily life.
- ▼ **Scholar:** the character derives sorcerous power and understanding from means that are not directly sexually-oriented.

As with Will, there is no Lore minimum for combinations, and Psycho is available only in combination with another descriptor. Celibate and Wanton are incompatible. Therefore the eight available Lore descriptors are: Celibate,

Wanton, Scholar, Celibate + Psycho, Wanton + Psycho, Scholar + Psycho, Celibate + Scholar, Wanton + Scholar.

As a store or convention demo, the In Utero scenario is best played with the descriptors from the core book as listed on their sheets, because the players should understand the scenario to be a “free will” session, without being constrained by what the sheet “says” a character would do. However, if the characters were constructed using these specialized descriptors, Robert would be a Romantic Scholar and Jennifer would be a Devoted Scholar + Psycho.

SORCERER RORSCHACH

One of the best things about the scenario is to learn about and draw upon the values of the players as people, as fuel or a context for the events created during play. Given twenty-one different role-players to observe, I learned way more about these people than I’d anticipated, sometimes uncomfortably. More than once, a player made a remarkably revealing choice about the character, stating that they were playing him or her “as written,” when in reality nothing written dictated that particular choice at all.

Instead of redirecting or manipulating these perceptions, I restricted myself to perceiving and then reinforcing them. To encourage this effect, especially for new SORCERER players, I clarified that the players may use new information for characters’ decisions as the scenario proceeds, rather than simply play the character “as written” in a robotic way throughout. Any of the characters may decide to change his or her ways, or arrive at a new conclusion about what he or she wants, so some informal, out-of-character chat about these opportunities might be thrown into the course of play whenever it seems most useful.

Permission is hereby granted for all of the graphics in this chapter to be photocopied for non-profit use only, for purposes of demonstration play. Please go for it! Run demonstration sessions at a game stores, or at conventions – when you tell me about how it went, you’ll get written up at the website (and so will the store or convention).

Quick logistics point: it’s a three-player scenario, no more and no less.

The usual outcome in my sessions, perhaps due to subtle cues on my part, was a coordinated Banish on the two demons. I decided that, if the special effects made sense (as simple as if Jennifer and the Jennifer-demon were touching), Jennifer and her child could be physically reunited, that is, the

child could be “magically” returned to her womb. Therefore the story usually ended up as a “re-unite the family” plot.

However, tremendous variety emerged from group to group regarding just who these fictional people are, what directs their choices in life, and what agreements or compromises they make during play.

Compare these two sequences and resolutions.

Announced actions: Robert tries to Punish the Jennifer-demon, using Lore; Jennifer takes a fireplace poker to the Jennifer-demon’s head, using Stamina; the child-sorcerer attempts to Banish the child-demon, using Humanity + Will; the Jennifer-demon tries to embrace (and subdue) Robert, using Stamina; and the child-demon attempts to hit the child-sorcerer with Psychic Force, using Will. This would be a kind of pedestrian, people-against-demons combat scenario situation.

Robert: 3, 3, 5, 4 (his snap-shot Punish uses full dice, rather than just one, because he’s in the basement sorcerer-laboratory)

Jennifer: 9, 4, 10, 2

Child-sorcerer: 9, 9, 7, 3, 1, 1, 8, 6 (his snap-shot Banish uses one die for Will, but does get full Humanity in addition)

Jennifer-demon: 3, 7, 7, 6, 5

Child-demon: 1, 10, 1, 5, 1, 9

What happens? The child-demon’s psychic attack hits first, and the child-sorcerer aborts his Banish in order to defend, rolling Will for 3, 5, 3, 4, 10, 6, 9. Jennifer’s next up with her fireplace-poker, and the Jennifer-demon aborts her attack on Robert to defend, rolling Stamina for 3, 8, 8, 10, 4. The poker hits for one temporary and one lasting penalty. Robert’s Punish finally lands, and the Jennifer-demon rolls 5, 10, 1, 8 to resist, including her already-existing Binding strength as a bonus but also taking her penalties into account for two dice less. We finish up with the Jennifer-demon having been struck by the poker for minimal penalties (one lasting penalty remaining), as well as being un-Punished and most likely vexed, and with the child-sorcerer unscathed.

Here’s a completely different situation, though: Jennifer tries to Banish the child-demon from her body, using Will + Humanity; Robert tries to hurl an unconscious Stephanie through the living-room window (a nasty fall, but better than disembowelment), using Stamina; the child-sorcerer speaks through his demon-host’s mouth, “Father, help me!”, using Humanity; the

child-demon attempts to direct Jennifer's arm to strike Robert, using Will; and the Jennifer-demon tries to kill Stephanie with her hands, using Stamina. To clarify a little, Jennifer and the Jennifer-demon are acting in alliance, hoping to roll victories from the killing (and sacrifice) to the ritual; Robert is currently unaware that the child in the demon's body is his son.

Robert: 2, 7, 2

Jennifer: 9, 9, 4, 7, 1, 4

Child-sorcerer: 4, 4, 2, 8, 9, 1, 8

Jennifer-demon: 9, 4, 1, 1, 2

Child-demon: 8, 4, 2, 2, 10, 4

What happens? In this case, the child-demon's attempt to control Jennifer occurs first, and Jennifer aborts her Banish to resist it, rolling Will for 4, 1, 5, 1, 2. The child-sorcerer's spoken plea is up next, and the Jennifer-demon chooses not to abort its action, rolling a single die for a 5, and thus Robert must roll his Will to defend. He also chooses not to abort and is restricted to a single die, rolling 8. The Jennifer-demon's attack on Stephanie comes next, and since Robert's defenestration won't matter much if the demon's attack hits, Robert finally aborts his action and defends Stephanie against the attack with 9, 9, 9.

The outcomes here are a little trickier but far more interesting in dramatic terms. Jennifer's next action will be to strike Robert, involuntarily, as directed by the child-demon's Will, and with two bonus dice from the demon's victories. Meanwhile, Robert has realized that his own son has spoken to him from out of the demon's body. He has failed to get Stephanie out of the window, but did defend her from the Jennifer-demon. He gets a Humanity gain roll, rolling 7, 7, 8, 9, 1 against 1, 7, 3, 4, 5, bumping his Humanity up to 6.

One issue concerned the sympathy or general good-ness of the player-characters. Robert varied from being an outright lying bastard to a rather heroic-husband type, which was usually apparent from his opening conversation with Stephanie and from his reaction to the appearance of the real Jennifer. Jennifer, on the other hand, varied all over the place, including a shrill bitch, a shivering victim, a heroic survivor, and in one instance a comedic foil, which was painful to watch. The child character turned out to be unilaterally sympathetic to all the players, which isn't surprising, although the player in each case had a free hand in deciding what sort of actions he might have been responsible for over the last decade.

The second issue concerned sympathy for the demons, which depended

on the way I played them: how ruthless and brutal they were in pursuing their Desires, and especially how sincerely or "human"-ly the Jennifer-demon voiced her interactions. Giving her a flat, dangerous tone and a predator-like stare as she declares her "love" for Robert has a definite impact on the group, as opposed to that produced by giving her a more normally-voiced plea for Robert's commitment to the child she carries. The final Banish which typically ended the scenario was by no means the same thing across instances of play. Some groups ended up reassuring and even thanking the demons; others treated them as terrifying monsters to be eliminated at all costs.

Finally, not surprisingly, the overall Humanity outcomes ranged all over the place. It's fascinating to compare two groups which each reunited the family, but with one racked down four or five points of Humanity per character, and the other averaging at one or two points gain. The key factor is Stephanie's fate – it ranged across her being mutilated, killed (sacrificed), knocked unconscious and ignored, ushered safely out of the condo early on, engaged in the debate of "what to do" as an equal, and even becoming a sorcerer.

Testimonial

When I was pregnant, it was hard to role-play because every emotion was magnified times ten and I was very scatter-brained. I tried to stay away from mother and child relationship issues, because it would hit too close to home. When I broke up with [the father], I might have tortured a man or two, in-game, a little more than if that had not happened.

I tried to stay away from sexual relations with other player-characters because I did not want anyone to think I wanted to be with them. The first time I played a role-playing game my character and another single character got involved, and everyone thought I wanted him in real life. I found that I could get away with having sexual relations with women's characters because they would not think I wanted anything more.

My solution to the whole problem was to stop caring what people thought and it worked. When I played a live action role-playing game, I did not know anyone that well, and what they thought did not really matter because the only time I saw them was at the game.



Chapter Four:

PARAGON

This chapter presents a short story and some role-playing interpretations of its content based on the male story-type described in Chapter 2. Like the previous chapter, it's built mainly as a contrived illustration, even more so, in fact. The short story is best regarded as an elaborate illustration in prose.

Also, the swimming pool analogy is just the same as with In Utero: swimming along in the water, mainly experiencing it, but along the surface rather than submerged.

... So this is hell. I'd never have believed it.
You remember all we were told about the
torture-chambers, the fire and brimstone,
the "burning marl." Old wives' tales!
There's no need for red-hot pokers. Hell is
— other people.

—J.P. Sartre, No Exit

PARAGON: THE STORY

In the days before the Son of Heaven ascended to the Jade Throne to begin the Great Dynasty, the southern lands of the Empire suffered from the rebellion of dishonorable generals and their self-seeking captains. Soldiers became bandits, using their rank as privilege to pillage as they pleased, and before peace and harmony reasserted themselves, the peasants and townsfolk suffered for many years. The worst of their persecutors was Killer Zang.

In the days before the Great Dynasty, few of the privileged knew or cared.

The monastery's seven small buildings were nested in a green valley, sometimes foggy but usually bright with sunshine and flowers. The central building was a pretty pagoda trimmed with ornate curlicues and railings, much-loved and reverently tended.

Within the central temple, in the place made most holy by the regard of the ancestors, the elders of the Golden Road sat in a stern row. A young man clad in the robe of a student monk kneeled before them. They regarded him silently for a moment.

"Xin Hai," began the one in the center. "Never have we seen a more devoted student of the Way. Your unswerving obedience of the tenets of the Golden Road exceeds all expectations.

"Your answer to the Mirror Gongan was unprecedented for a student of your rank, and it has prompted a wholly new direction of enlightened discussion in the Emperor's Academy.

"You display unusual mastery of the Many-Eyed Dragon fighting form, and the sparring masters refuse to continue to lose face in class."

The Chief Elder paused. Then he snapped, "It's intolerable!"

The student's serene and humble expression altered to one of bewilderment. "Y-yes sir!" he stammered. "I abase myself!" He did so, with his brows wrinkled and his gaze darting to one side.

"We have received the Imperial Decree of the Emperor's Temple," continued the Elder, and his voice rang like an iron bell. "You must leave the temple and journey from village to village. You must drink of wine, and touch of the flesh of women, and taste of the meat of fish, fowl, and beast. It is decreed: you are to walk the road to Hell."

Young Xin Hai had listened with more and more astonishment, and finally he found his voice. "Exile? The flesh of women? Revered masters, I cannot believe my ears! Not once, in my whole life, have I broken a single tenet! Even one such act is enough to condemn me to everlasting torment. How can you ask me to shame myself and the Order this way?"

His protests went unheeded. They took him to a secret room, where a wizened old man in chains conjured up a nasty bundle of hissing things, and they loosed it upon him. It determined to drag him straight to Hell, and marked him with its blood, naming him as its prey!

They told him that he must Bind the thing in Hell Speech, accepting responsibility for the things it Needed. The elder said, "You must choose: obey us and Bind this thing, or disobey the Imperial Decree and be named outlaw." Xin Hai wept and protested again, but, in the end, he obeyed.

The next day, he set out upon the road, with the demon set in a basket

that he carried at the end of a staff. He wore travelling clothes, a conical straw hat, and a woeful expression.

Weeks later, Xin Hai sat glumly against a wooden wall inside an inn of bad reputation in Wai Xing Si, a notorious border town. Men who called themselves soldiers, but whose primary activity consisted of intimidating and robbing peasants, roistered all around him, as bruised-looking girls moved to inept music. Smoke filled the air and the floor was sticky with long-dried spills of rice wine.

Two nasty little eyes glowed in the basket beside him, visible as its lid was tipped up on one side. "Sssst!" hissed the demon. Xin Hai shifted his eyes to look at it without changing expression.

It asked, "Have you drunk of the wine, and eaten of the beef?" He answered in the affirmative, curtly. "Did you touch the flesh of women?" He glared briefly at the demon, then looked away and nodded once. The demon grinned like a little furnace. "Better than wine and beef, isn't it?"

One of the young women approached him, offering more wine, but Xin Hai grimaced and gestured, "No." He then reflected and gestured again, this time offering her a space to sit by him. "No wine, nothing else," he said, "Just take a moment to rest. You look tired." Xin Hai wanted to talk to someone besides his obnoxious companion and the imagined voices of the elders in his mind. "This person is Xin Hai," he said formally.

She sat herself against the wall next to him. "Oh, that's nice," she said. "I am Ailian." She darted a glance toward him but received none of the rough flirtation she expected. "Are you all right?"

Xin Hai smiled, tiredly. "I'm fine. It's nice of you to ask, and—" he decided to say, "it's probably dangerous for you to work here. Is it what you want to do?"

"What I want? Who possibly cares?"

"No, really. What you want, for yourself."

She shrugged in a shy way which indicated sincerity. "I was sold from my home village years and years ago, before I can really remember. I'd like to go back and bring some money with me, maybe, and perhaps my parents would recognize me. It's called Xiu Jian, a little place in the mountains."

"It sounds nice. But I couldn't carry out the rules I've been ordered to follow, in such a place."

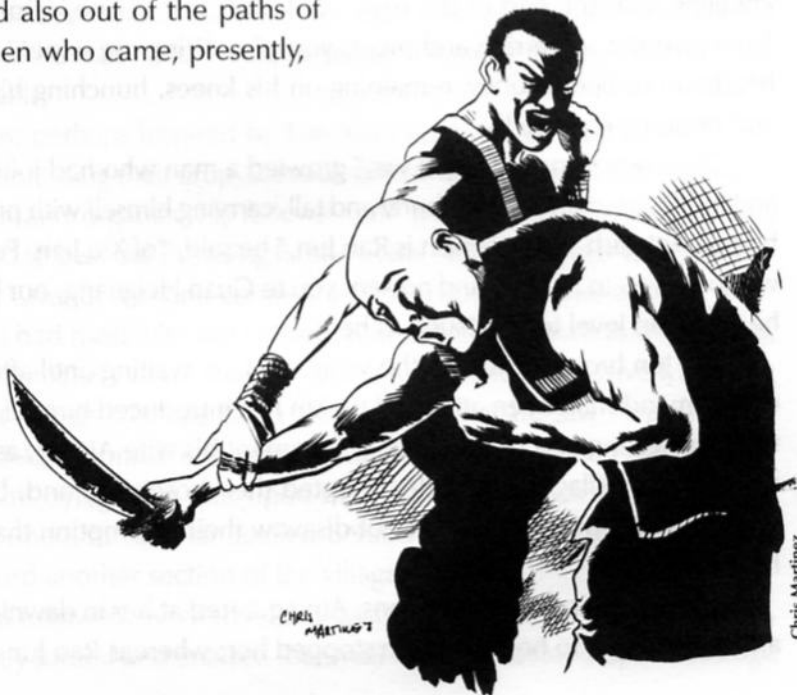
She smiled wanly at him and said, cynically, "What rules?" She turned her head, slowly, and stared forward for a moment. He regarded her. Her face, in profile, showed him a terrible, possibly true thing that he'd never before imagined: the straightforward perception, lacking all meditation or analysis, that there were no such things as rules, anywhere. He felt sad and awed.

The doors of the inn slammed open to admit a new wave of armored, swearing, stumbling thugs. Their cries for wine and music swiftly turned to belligerent threats, as their regimental badges identified them as Killer Zang's men, distinct from the squadron that currently occupied the inn's main room. Debased and ignored as their official duties might be, none of the soldiers had put aside their regimental rivalries; indeed, those rivalries had become badges of gang territory.

Xin Hai saw the fight develop well before it occurred, anticipating each utterance, each shove, and the ripple of realization, across the room, that a battle was under way. Even as the glass shattered and the hoarse yells began, he was moving to leave. Under a chair swung wildly in circles, around a suddenly-formed cluster of struggling bravos, waiting a moment as a shoved, staggering fellow slammed into the side door, then opening it ... Xin Hai looked back to see Ailian. She vainly sought to free herself from the grasp of two men, one each from the battling squads.

Xin Hai moved as the Many-Eyed Dragon, stepping freely across table-tops and heads as well as the floor, seeming at least once to disappear entirely, at last looming behind the man holding Ailian's wrist. He moved twice: once, upon seizing the man's wrist – which promptly opened the fingers of that hand – elbowing that one just beneath the nose; and again, driving his fingers into the tissues of the other man's lower jaw from below, standing him on his toes and sending him far away. Ailian found herself swept up and, without apparent effort, taken outside the inn.

Soon, they stood well away from the inn and also out of the paths of the horsemen who came, presently,



to join in the fray. It was a bad one, turning uglier by the moment, and looked to spread.

"You are fast," she said. "I didn't see – couldn't tell what happened, but you fought them."

"It's not a fight that concerns me further, I think," he said. "Besides, my way is decreed for me." He failed to convince himself. His exile seemed utterly weary and his words sounded hollow, like a student with a poem to copy or something equally trivial. He cast about for something to do with her, as well as with himself. "Why not return to your home village? Perhaps I can be of some kind of use there, before I continue on my way."

She shrugged again and agreed.

Xiu Jian was just as Xin Hai hoped it would be, much like the place of his birth, of which he had not even dreamed for over ten years. It was typical of the small, isolated villages of the era, a place in which people were born, lived, and died without travelling more than a mile from home. Upon arriving, however, they found that Killer Zang's men had preceded them. A row of villagers knelt in submission before a swaggering, badged bully, as two of his cronies beat a youth with poles. One of the villagers, the headman as indicated by his jacket, knocked his forehead to the ground before the shouter's feet.

"That's me, Luo Ma!" shouted the bandit, apparently coming to the end of his diatribe. "I'm the one you listen to, the sergeant of Killer Zang! We are the army, and your service is your duty! He rides here in five days, and you will be ready!" Here he indicated a startlingly beautiful woman kneeling near the end of the row. "And she's first in line, remember that. Now give me some rice and meat, you pigs. Bring me wine!" The village headman turned to obey, remaining on his knees, hunching his shoulders and nodding repeatedly.

"Not very impressive, are we," growled a man who had joined Xin Hai and his companion. He was burly and tall, carrying himself with pride despite his peasant garb. "This person is Rao Jun," he said, "of Xiu Jian. Permit me to welcome you to Xiu Jian and present you to Guan Heiguang, our headman," he added in level tones, "such as he is."

Rao Jun brought them to the village square, waiting until after the bandits' demands had been attended to. Xin Hai introduced himself, bowing to Guan Heiguang and to the beautiful woman, his wife Aiping, as well as to several other village elders. He accepted their hospitality and, because he knew it would upset them, did not disavow their assumption that he was a holy man.

Ailian received more reactions. Aiping stared at her in dawning surprise and began to go to her, but Guan stopped her; whereas Rao Jun welcomed

the girl strongly, earning a level stare from Guan. However, not a voice was raised, nor were the standard forms of homespun courtesy missed. All was subtle and simple, such that absolutely nothing happened.

The bandits had commandeered Guan's hut. Xin Hai let the villagers insist that he take another man's hut, not wishing to argue. Ailian stayed with a family that included a girl about her age, as arranged by Rao Jun.

An hour before dawn, the basket twitched. Slowly, its lid raised on one side, and the two eyes of the demon glared forth, its gaze sweeping left and right. A second, smaller pair of eyes then looked out as well, and presently a clot of darkness emerged from the basket and crawled into the night. The trail of scum it left dried to nothingness before anyone woke up.

When the sun rose, Aiping's body, stripped and brutally beaten, was found at the edge of the fields.

Rao Jun lost no time at all and gathered a dozen angry men to him. He and they strode to where Luo Ma and his friends lay, and the villagers set to serve the bandits joined them immediately. "Get ropes and tent-poles," Rao Jun ordered, and Luo Ma awoke to find himself held and being bound, and his men scuffling to escape.

The bandit struggled against the cords holding him. "You peasant swine!" he spat. "You'll all burn for this!" He did not manage to finish, for the farmers impaled him with their sharpened poles, thrusting a dozen of them through his belly at a dozen different angles. Luo Ma's threats turned to screams.

The two remaining bandits had won free, but they did not care to rescue their leader nor to challenge the farmers directly; they ran to their horses only to see the animals running loose. One of them ran to chase his mount down the road, and the other seized a flaming brand, then ran into the grain fields.

His ploy, perhaps inspired by Luo Ma's final words, worked well. The farmers feared losing their crop above all else, and Rao Jun was hard-pressed to browbeat and organize his fellows. One band chased down the road, another tried to beat out the rising flames in the field, and others fell to blows and shouts. Cries of fear and confusion arose throughout the village.

Xin Hai had risen with the sun and had devoted himself to meditation, ignoring the mockery of his basketed companion. He now arrived, running with basket in hand, to see Guan Heiguang. What he saw surprised him greatly – thinking himself unobserved, Guan approached Luo Ma, who lay ignored in his dying, and spat upon the bandit, then took his sword. The headman turned, as Xin Hai ducked behind a building's corner, and then he ran toward another section of the village.

Xin Hai followed, worried and suspicious. Guan looked into two huts, then abruptly turned and entered the small woods that stood upon the edge

of the village. A woman cried out, and Xin Hai leaped forward as he called out, realizing what he'd realized even as he spoke: "Headman, stop! Would you kill your daughter?" Guan stood before Ailian, who had backed against a tree. He cocked his head to one side. "My daughter?" he cried, and the words trailed into a rapid, shrill laugh. He swung his blade at Xin Hai's head.

For once, shocked by his own thoughts, Xin Hai's combat skills deserted him; the blade whined toward his skull. However, his demon was there, in the basket which had fallen to the ground. From it emerged a hissing, steaming glow, and the monk was sprawling, struck but unharmed, and Guan stared at the broken blade in his hand.

Xin Hai rose and killed the headman by extending his arm, the heel of his palm continuing smoothly in a straight line forward and slightly upwards. The line of its motion sent Guan's head straight back and downwards, crashing to the earth with his body trailing after like the tail of a kite.

Ailian backed away, partly crouched, her gait awkward. "Father – mother –" she tried, but failed. Her gaze met Xin Hai's as he stared at her, equally wordless, and then darted to the basket. Her feet suddenly found themselves, and she fled.

Guan Heiguang lay dead among crushed and broken wood, terrible and insignificant at the same time. Xin Hai stared at the body. He had used his art perfectly, and this man was dead, but somehow he felt like the diminished one of the two. It took him some moments to realize that the irritating, grating noise he heard came from behind him, rather than from his own mind. It was the demon, snickering at him.

Xin Hai spun on his heel and approached the basket. "Isn't it enough that I pollute my soul with your help?" And, not waiting for a reply, he rapped out in Hell Speech, "Silence!" The demon shut up its laughing with a pained hiss. Xin Hai's lip curled. "Ah, you know that, don't you?" He leaned forward, and his voice blazed with Hell Speech more powerful than any he'd dared use before: "You stay!"

Meanwhile, Rao Jun had finally managed to organize a coherent effort toward stopping containing the fires in the fields, although confusion still sputtered among most of the village, and occasional flame-gouts burst unpredictably from the grain. He stood on a small rise, calling to one group or another as they beat the flames with cloth or bore water to where it was most needed. He was not prepared for the monk's arrival or his words, "Too bad for you, but your daughter's still alive."

Rao Jun turned, to receive a fist in his belly. "Listen up, peasants!" the monk called out, and he struck Rao Jun again, back-handed, across the face. "Tell them about your lover, Rao Jun," he said. Then he struck again. "Guan saved you some trouble, didn't he," and again, "and you want your

secrets kept, don't you," and again, "All you want is to be in charge, isn't it, Rao Jun!" Then he realized that the villager had blocked each of his last three blows, which had not happened since Xin Hai had worn the sash of a novice. His head was rocked by a savage, crossing punch, and for a moment, the world went away.

Xin Hai's training over-rode his reactions. He leaped into the air so lightly that he seemed to float, hands held limply before his face, and he seemed instantaneously to spin there, his foot lashing out to strike Rao Jun's head directly behind the ear. He landed and stepped back, fully conscious again, confident that the Dragon Rises blow would stun even the strongest man.

Rao Jun did not fall. He did not even reel, although his head snapped sideways so far that it bounced back from his shoulder. He crouched, then sprang forward in a bull-like rush, seizing the monk. However, his face sagged like an unconscious man's, the eyes half-closed and the mouth slack. Xin Hai's eyes widened as he realized what he was fighting, and he only escaped its clutches with the loss of dignity and skin, rolling to his feet among burning grain.

The monk fell back into his stance, his weight sinking down under him on his right leg as his hands spread outwards. His expression became calm. A sort of relaxed ripple moved up his body from the ground, culminating in his fingers, which moved only slightly, but from which emanated a distinct, cracking "pop." What happened next could not be described by an observer – he and Rao Jun fell upon one another, the villager's hands tearing cloth from the monk's clothes. Then Xin Hai was somehow behind his opponent, and he unleashed a terrible series of strikes, each one impacting Rao Jun's body with greater impact, knocking the man backwards, forwards, and sideways. The final strike suspended him, standing and shaking, at the end of Xin Hai's fist – his head snapped back, and from his mouth issued a clot of horror, smoking and grasping, which fell to the earth.

Rao Jun collapsed, shuddering, and Xin Hai ignored him, casting about for the demonic spawn that had nestled inside him. He saw it: a mauve, jumbled thing. Its shape altered by the instant, as it lashed out with suddenly-formed limbs and subsided into jellied puddles, but it moved very fast across the ground.

Xin Hai pursued, knowing its destination. He stood over the crawling thing as it approached the basket, then scooped it up into his hand, ignoring its scraping cry. Mucus and matter spattered from it. He pried open the basket's lid and forced the demonic spawn into its parent. The demon responded with a terrible hiss, and black flames surged upwards along Xin Hai's arm. He spoke in Hell Speech again and slammed down the lid of the basket, and for a moment it bulged from within, fluid seeping from between

the wicker weave. The bulging then ceased as the demon screamed in agony. "Take back your filthy progeny!" Xin Hai grated. "It has done your work."

Shriveled, and pained, the demon remained defiant. "Ha! Whose 'work' fired the grain, my hero? Who was it took their leader from these people? Oh, they're safe from Killer Zang *now*, surely!"

Its words struck Xin Hai like hammers, and he saw it all: three dead, one man broken and shamed, the girl fled in loneliness and fear, a burning field, and the threat looming near . . . "Damn!" he cried. "Damnation!" He squatted in misery. "No one can be a good man – there is no path!" He swore again with great feeling. "Why did they cast me from the Way?"

The demon giggled long and loudly. "Follower of the Way, indeed! What were you but an obedient lump of clay molded to the shape of the tenets? Sitting in your cozy temple with that pious smirk on your face ... Why, I was more human than you! You were bound for Hell faster than anyone alive."

Xin Hai raised his head and regarded the thing. "Really," he said. "Faster than now?"

"Much faster. You're still on the way, though. Today was a nice change; you'll become a new Rao Jun in no time."

The monk stared hard at the demon and a certain fire kindled in him. "You have revealed more than you intended, in your gloating," he said, and he straightened, turning to gaze at the smoke over Xiu Jian. "I am indeed walking the road to Hell, but . . . but nothing forces me to *arrive* there, not even you. Who I must be to others while on this road is my choice alone. The tenets of the Way cannot help me, but nevertheless I am not helpless. And perhaps in time the Way itself, which lies beyond the tenets, may help me as well."

He stood up, and hefted the demon's basket on its pole, on his shoulder. Ignoring its questions, he strode forward. As he walked, he breathed deep, and the air smelled rich and sweet.

Eventually, he overtook Ailian and told her why Guan Heiguang had sought to kill her. She nodded to herself and was silent for a time. Then she asked him what he would do.

"I'm going back to Wai Xing Si with you and dealing with Killer Zang, with my demon here. Xiu Jian will be saved."

She gazed worriedly at the basket. "Your demon, you say."

Xin Hai's eyes narrowed. "He'll do as he's told, or get his tail twisted." He glanced significantly back up the pole, at the basket. "Again."

She asked, "And your rules, they permit you to do this?"

He smiled at her – a pure, brilliant wave of happiness. "What rules?" he asked her.

DEBRIEFING

The back-story

In a story like *Paragon*, the back-story of relationships and old resentments is crucial in one way and irrelevant in another. It's crucial because the various supporting characters are up to something, and they will respond to any stimulus. However, it's also irrelevant because the real story is composed of the protagonist's decisions, not the supporting characters'. The back-story exists solely to provide a context – a set of potential Bangs – for those decisions.

As for that back-story, it begins with a pair of siblings, Guan Heiguang and Guan Shaonan, born into the family that traditionally exercised leadership in the village of Xiu Jian. At an early age, they agreed to uphold this tradition and always be allies. When they grew up, he married the village beauty, named Aiping, and she married a forceful and imaginative man named Rao Jun. Their plan was to combine the best of the area into one united, powerful family. However, after a few years, Rao Jun and Aiping had an affair. Their daughter, Ailian, was at first raised as Guan's daughter, but during a time of famine, she was sold into servitude against her mother's wishes.

When Ailian returns to the village, Guan Shaonan had died some years before, and Guan Heiguang had long shown himself to be a mediocre village leader at best. Her return prompts extreme reactions, such as Guan Heiguang's hatred for the wife who'd betrayed him, his fear of Rao Jun, and resentment for the daughter that was not his, as well as Rao Jun's resentment of the wife he'd never loved and for Guan's official leadership.

That's all there is to it! It's quite simple, and if *Paragon* represented a



scenario for play, it would require minimal preparation. All that matters are that the situation threatens the village's continued survival, that innocents are permitted to suffer, and that the solutions to these problems are contradictory. No immediate solution is available: Guan Heiguang, obsessed with murder and past wrong, is no longer suited to lead, and Rao Jun is willing to sacrifice anyone just so he can be recognized as leader.

Humanity

As described in Chapter 2, Humanity is plural in a story of this type, representing at least two of the zones in the social-morality diagram. In this instance, the first type of Humanity is ties of society (community), operating according to the traditional responsibilities known to everyone in the culture, aimed at the stability of the community. The second type is acting for other individuals' direct benefit in the face of injustice. The concept that a single act may invoke Humanity checks or gains of both types, in any combination, applies in full.

Xin Hai represents a special case of Humanity problems. In the culture of the story, a student monk is forced to "empty" the inner two zones (personal, kinship), in order to establish his obligations to the outer zones (community, humanity at large). Students are separated from family and access to potential sexual partners, and they are encouraged to devote all their time and energy to their immediate community and to abstract principles. Ultimately the goal is to reconcile these efforts with the inner two zones, such that the person is able to address conflicts among the zones with a clear mind. This training is generally very difficult as those inner zones are hard to ignore.

However, rarely, a person ignores the inner two zones easily and therefore quickly masters the rules for prioritizing the outer two. This is a disaster, for if only the forms of those rules are met, and the emptiness in the middle is only accentuated, a terrible non-human is created, a social parasite. He has no true understanding of the human condition and will not be able to judge conflicts among the zones either for himself or others, despite his apparent mastery of the formal training.

Therefore Xin Hai was already losing tons of Humanity, even before he Bound the demon, and his elders were acting to save him from his own self or, failing that, saving society from him. It's a sink-or-swim situation. The demon will force challenges to his Humanity wherever he goes. Either he learns to cope with the inner-zones issues such as anger and sexuality, in both others and himself, or he'll be taken by the demon.

The story is not a romance between Xin Hai and Ailian. The interest between the two of them includes a possible awakening of his long-repressed physical desires, but that possibility is minor. Her real role in the story is

simply to be another human being with whom he sympathizes, bringing his attention away from himself for once.

The demon

This little monster is designed to aggravate the moral and personal issues in a story like Paragon. It is Inconspicuous, kind of a Muppet in its basket, but its disarming image belies how dangerous it can be. Its Telltale is a powerful rune inscribed on the basket's lid.

Stamina 9, Will 10, Lore 9, Power 10.

Desire: Corruption, which has to be of the person's own doing, as opposed to simple Ruin.

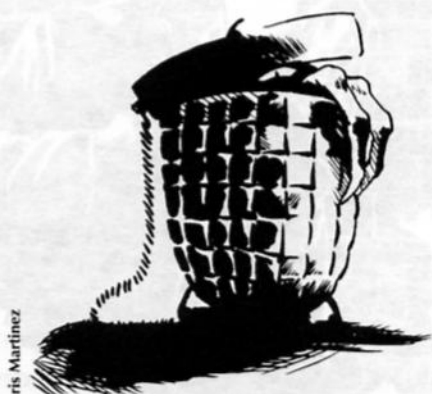
Need: any violence in its presence

The demon continually goads its master and reinforces the mind-set that has already led him or her into an irreconcilable conflict of moral directives. It cares greatly about the outcome of the moral conflict embodied in the character's Kicker, so it works hard to keep its Binder alive – it wouldn't want his or her death to subvert the critical duel.

These stories are especially powerful when the hero is saving others by Binding the demon. The books *The Exorcist* and *Legion*, and the movies based on them, offer especially good examples. These demons love self-imposed martyrdom. For instance, the hero of Paragon is perfectly free to give up his status as a monk entirely rather than Bind the demon, but he chooses not to.

Its abilities fall into three categories:

1. Perception of its Binder, conferred to itself. It can find him if they're separated, as well as discern his or her emotional state. Its Armor and Protection are also both conferred to itself. It uses these abilities habitually.
2. Travel conferred to itself. It uses this to "show up" if it's discarded, or for rescues. It also has non-lethal Special Damage, and Vitality, both of which it confers to the Binder in a pinch. It especially likes being asked to do so.
3. Perception (of hidden passion), Taint, and Spawn, all of which confer to itself and are reserved for subtle use on others besides its Binder, as follows.



Its nasty, subtle trick is to “awaken” the inner demons of other people, using its Spawn ability. Typically, it figures out who represents the weakest emotional link in a situation and then gives them a demon to make things boil over. A single linchpin NPC individual, hence a single Spawn, is usually more than sufficient, especially since it will use Taint first to exacerbate the individual’s sense of either righteousness or isolation. The Taint roll, if successful, provides bonuses for the Spawn roll. The Spawn-demon’s personality should be derived from the passions and conflicts experienced by the target person, such that it is kind of a horrible Inner Child for them.

In the story, the demon-Spawn that parasitizes Rao Jun doesn’t have a difficult job. All it does is amplify his desire to lead others and to be the main man of the village. Once his Humanity drops to zero, then his reasoning allows for any abuse or risk, such as bringing down the wrath of the bandits upon the village, or permitting murders within its members to go unpunished. The more trouble, the more need for a leader.

Setting

The setting for Paragon is closest in concept to early dynastic China (sixth century AD), although I freely confess that it’s hopelessly syncretic-mainland-Asian, doing much violence to the actual diversity of cultures, historical periods, and naming conventions. I’ve borrowed heavily from Tibetan and Korean customs. The story was inspired in part by the Korean legend of Won Hyo, as related in the book *Thousand Peaks: Korean Zen – Tradition and Teachers*, by Mu Soeng Sunim.

Some references include the films *The Silent Flute* (usually titled *Circle of Iron*), *The Bride with White Hair*, *Ninja Scroll*, and *The Five Deadly Venoms*. The novels *Rajan* and *Koren* by Tim Lukeman, and any of the Judge Dee novels by Robert van Gulik are also recommended.



Chris Martinez

Character creation uses the following descriptions for scores. A score over 4 permits more than one description, but avoid contradictions (e.g. Good living plus Asceticism).

STAMINA

- ▼ **Martial arts:** this training emphasizes a wide variety of activities, including medicine and first-aid. It also includes the new rules presented in the next section.
- ▼ **Asceticism:** excessive privations and mortifications have inured the character to pain and honed his or her concentration.
- ▼ **Good living:** good food, good rest, and other benefits have resulted in a well-built, healthy body and mind.
- ▼ **Toughened by toil:** a lean but nutritious diet, constant labor, and no frills have resulted in a veritable rock of physical power.
- ▼ **Blessed:** some people just look and feel good all the time.

WILL

- ▼ **Belief system:** placing value on both aspects of Humanity as described earlier.
- ▼ **Vengeful:** someone's been wronged and the character is setting things straight.
- ▼ **Selfish:** the character is out for his or her own advantage and not shy about it.
- ▼ **Happy:** the character enjoys life, secure that everything works out eventually, except perhaps for mean people.
- ▼ **Authority:** the character has an internalized sense of social authority; however, not all authority figures actually have this.

LORE

- ▼ **Scholar:** the character has compiled and synthesized information from many sources to develop his understanding.
- ▼ **Student:** the character has been taught the stuff in order to avoid it.
- ▼ **Superstition:** the character is familiar with uneducated peasant rituals, which may be very effective.
- ▼ **Cursed:** the character's knowledge is derived from a family dishonor or crime from generations ago.

COVER/PAST

- ▼ **Monk/nun:** this status does not imply belief, or even asceticism.
- ▼ **Priest:** unlike a monk, a priest is responsible for a larger community and

a lot of interaction with regular folk. Again, not all priests buy into the belief system they represent.

- ▼ **Professional:** doctor, innkeeper, matchmaker, and similar.
- ▼ **Courtier:** high status in the Imperial Bureaucracy.
- ▼ **Official:** judge, courier, tax collector, or similar.
- ▼ **Soldier:** the armies of the Empire are very formal; this status includes rank, squad number, district, and many other designators.
- ▼ **Farmer or Laborer:** one important detail about this status is that their freedom of movement is severely limited; most farmers have never travelled outside their home village.
- ▼ **Mendicant:** beggars are surprisingly well-treated in this culture, aside from the fact that they are not guaranteed food or shelter.
- ▼ **Outlaw:** treat as any other Cover in terms of skills, but an outlaw is feared and hated by nearly everyone, including other outlaws.

For Price, use the general guidelines in the SORCERER rules.

Xin Hai, the hero of Paragon, is described in game terms as Stamina 5 (martial arts, asceticism), Will 3 (belief system), Lore 2 (student), Cover 5 (monk), Price -1 (outcast), and Humanity 3 to start.

TOO MUCH MARTIAL ARTS

I couldn't help it! During the course of writing Paragon, I somehow managed to derive this add-on rules set for SORCERER, based wholly on cinematic kung fu from the Hong Kong films of the 1970s. It owes a great deal to the role-playing game *Swashbuckler* and to discussions with Raven; also, the name of Xin Hai's fighting style was originally suggested by Bill Masek.

Poison Clan rocks the world!

—The Five Deadly Venoms

The following ideas are intended to provide some structure and color for the already-existing SORCERER rules, rather than adding new rules on top of them. All of the usual concepts about setting the order of the actions, rolling victories into bonus dice, and anything else in the main rules still apply as usual. That said, on to the mayhem!

Everyone with the Martial Arts descriptor for Stamina knows seven moves.

- ▼ **Short strike:** a kick, punch, or similar "hit" without changing position very much.
- ▼ **Long strike:** a kick, punch, or similar "hit" that includes a moving commitment, changing the attacker's position dramatically.

- ▼ **Power inside:** a head butt, knee or elbow strike, or anything else using a limb only one joint away from the torso.
- ▼ **Grab:** all traps, locks, chokes, scissor holds, or anything similar.
- ▼ **Throw:** throwing, sweeping, tripping, take-downs, tackling, etc.
- ▼ **Divert:** like Throw except that the target is not taken off his feet, so much as directed elsewhere.
- ▼ **Stance:** the "base" for any given fighting style, used as a starting point, a transition to any move, and as a fully-defensive maneuver.

Except for Stance (see below), all the moves are standard offensive actions for SORCERER combat. They all do damage and they all permit the usual full dice of Stamina as defense after the move is in motion. No move is intrinsically more effective than any other – effectiveness is strictly a function of the existing combat system, specifically bonus dice for moment-to-moment tactics as judged by the GM and the group in general.

Everyone defines his or her style of fighting, starting with a cool name. What defines a style is which move may flow into which others. You get five "links" to distribute as you wish. Also, all moves are automatically linked to themselves, and linked both to and from the move Stance.

You also get to name the moves in your link list, picturesquely. A named move may still include a wide variety of actual movements; e.g., calling your Throw "Bow to the East" still lets you apply it as a trip, a sweep, a throw, or anything else appropriate, as you see fit during play.

If a character uses a move that does not flow from his or her previous move, the character's defense dice are reduced to one, and they remain there. This rather severe penalty may only be removed (and the dice return to normal) if the character subsequently employs the Stance move.

The Stance move is composed of three parts:

- ▼ It is treated as the "full defense" option in SORCERER (Stamina + two bonus dice), meaning that it delivers no damage to anyone.
- ▼ As mentioned above, it automatically has a link both to and from every other move.
- ▼ Also, as mentioned above, by using Stance, one "re-sets" the reduced-defense penalty incurred by using an "off" move for your style.

Combatants may roll Lore vs. one another's Stamina, either after watching them fight, seeing their stance, or going through a combat exchange with them.

- ▼ A successful roll means that the character may use the rules in SORCERER & SWORD about saving victories across rolls, as long as the links are followed.

- ▼ If this roll is failed, it may only be re-attempted after incurring enough penalties to override Stamina, and then using the Will rules to compensate. One may certainly apply victories from the Will roll, if successful, to the new Lore roll.

The above points permit all manner of classic situations in which the protagonist, beat to a pulp, spits some blood and returns to the fight with far greater skill and power than he or she exhibited previously.

A few more points include:

- ▼ Weapons play their usual role, in terms of what sort of damage is being done; all of the moves are considered to be functional with or without a weapon.
- ▼ Rolling victories of previous rolls into more dice for new rolls may be taken to indicate outrageous choreography; it should rely heavily on moment-to-moment placement and movement as implied by the moves taken in the previous exchange.
- ▼ Role-playing bonuses should definitely arise from depicted or described facial expressions and statements.
- ▼ New styles may be learned by adding Cover/Past descriptors through the usual SORCERER development mechanics.

Example styles

STYLE: WRATH OF THE MANY-EYED DRAGON

Links: Short strike to long strike, long strike to short strike, divert to long strike, divert to grab, grab to power inside.

Names for moves: Short strike = Dragon Awakens, Long strike = Rise From Sea, Power inside = The Jaws Close, Grab = Seize Golden Orb With Claw, Divert = Sink Into Sea

In this style, one needs to return to Stance in order to break out of the strike-strike-strike cycle.

STYLE: WILLOW DANCE

Links: Divert to throw, Divert to Power inside, Power inside to Divert, Throw to Divert, Power inside to Throw

Names for moves: Power inside = Wood Ruptures, Grab = Walks In Thicket, Throw = Uproot, Divert = Sway With Wind

This style is more flowing, with less linked moves but nearly full capacity to shift among them.

STYLE: WHITE GOD'S EMBRACE

Links: Divert to Grab, Grab to Power inside, Power inside to Grab, Grab to Throw, Throw to Grab

Names for moves: Power inside = Know Mortality, Grab = White God Knows Everyone, Throw = No One Escapes Karma, Divert = Do Not Rail Against The Inevitable

This style has Grab at its center, with various options emerging from and returning to there.

Testimonial

It really only centers around one person in our group ... one of the wives, and it started when she got together with her hubby. She is apparently incredibly sensitive, so when she plays the rest of the group feels like they have to hold back on any weirdness or extreme violence. Nobody else has any fun when she plays because of that, and they complain mightily because she's more concerned with role-playing going shopping for dresses and fixing her hair. She also thinks that any horror game is just too scary for her, and she refuses to play. The rest of us have played the same since we joined the group, and we all feel comfortable doing whatever while playing.

... Has any sexual and/or relationship activity occurred among PCs and/or NPCs?

Lots! Okay, not lots, but there have been a few stellar occasions when it has happened. In one game, my character had a lesbian relationship with another female player's character. Her boyfriend was running that game, and he gave her cursed armor so if my character touched her it would kill my character (hee!).

In that same game, the lesbians also had a sado-masochistic relationship with another player character (he was a halfling), but that was pretty much a one-time thing.

In a game run by my husband, my character (yes . . . again) got it on with another PC. Hubby decided to roll percentile dice to see if my character got pregnant, and she did. The group found out when we all got turned into flesh golems by a mad scientist and he grew our bodies back because we were all killed. The mad scientist asked if my character wanted the baby ... with modifications . . . er!!! So then I ended up playing a pregnant PC with a "modified" baby in-utero. It turned into a really nasty NPC. It was half human (my character)/ half dwarf (other PC)...and "something else."



Chapter Five:

AZH'ARN

Now we've swum down into the deep end of the swimming pool, below the surface entirely, to consider role-playing content in all its fictional, imaginative glory. This chapter presents a setting that combines the male and female story types presented in Chapter 2, but without any rules-customizing beyond the basic needs of play.

The astute reader has already noticed that these two story types are wholly compatible, because the reproductive type is a major part of the inmost circle of the societal type. In this setting, this connection is brought into sharp focus because demonic reproduction serves as the foundation for human society and sorcery.

The setting is sword-and-sorcery, using the descriptors and basic concepts from *SORCERER & SWORD*, mainly developed through play with lots of excess to make the points-at-issue as blunt and clear as possible. Also, *THE SORCERER'S SOUL* material includes some highly specialized demons and sorcery definitions to match the Humanity issues at hand. The literary antecedents include any number of comics and illustrations from the magazine *Heavy Metal* with swamps and insectoid monsters, the film *Angels and*

Insects to some extent, the art of H.R. Giger, and the culture of Melnibone in the early Elric stories by Michael Moorcock. It's exotic to an alien degree, disturbing, and simultaneously ornate and primal. In story terms, good references include the film *The Bride with White Hair* and the novel *The Golden Naginata* by Jessica Amanda Salmonson. If you're really feeling liberal-artsy, then a deep reference is *Sociobiology* by Edmund O. Wilson.

INSECTOID FANTASY

Is it past or future? On a far-off planet or in some unimaginable, unknown stage of our own? We simply left these questions unanswered.

The sun of Azk'Arn is white and weak, and as the skies are often overcast, one may almost always gaze at it without harm. Those same clouds, however, trap enough heat to keep the weather balmy throughout the year. At night, frequent and spectacular storms rip through the skies, although their impact on the ground is minimal beyond mild rains. The three small moons are unusual: they absorb rather than reflect light, so they are represented by moving round "zones" that are solid black with flickering edges, and one's gaze tends to shy away from them.

The landscape of Azk'Arn is composed mainly of shallow seas and island chains, with only one really sizable land mass and only two substantive mountain ranges. Several areas are characterized by unusual conical pits whose openings are nearly a mile across.

The creatures of this landscape are arthropodan (insects, spiders, and other jointed, many-legged creatures), but not identical to those we know. They include endoskeletal as well as exoskeletal anatomy and many reptilian features, and their size range is far wider, much more like the size range of mammals on Earth. Also, they're not just big robot-bugs from a movie like *Them*, but instead complex and behaviorally-flexible organisms, like the title character in *Alien*. Many are *eusocial*, which is to say, only one or a few females in a community reproduce (queens), much of the community

The reduction of conflicts in eusocial insect colonies is accomplished, then, not just by a high degree of relatedness . . . , but by the workers in modern forms depending for their genetic success on exactly the same third parties – siblings produced by their mother. ...

The tendency in the development of the largest human groups, although not always consistent, seems to be toward equality of opportunity for every individual to reproduce via its own offspring, rather than specializing baby production in one or a few individuals and baby care in others. [One] consequence is that competition and conflicts of interest are ... diverse and complex to an unparalleled degree.

—R.Alexander, *The Biology of Moral Systems*

is related to one another as siblings or near-siblings, and much of the community is sterile and devoted wholly to the benefit of the queens.

Culture

The people of Azk'Arn are human, but so severely adapted to their (alien?) environment that they could never be mistaken for our fellows. They most resemble people with Asian-European parents, with very light skin, and their hair grades from white to black with no brown or red pigment. Regional differences include at least one non-earthly skull shape and extreme, well-defined ranges of body-fat percentage.

The culture presents differing blends of savagery and sophistication, and in some cases includes unusual approaches to reproduction, at least for some members.

The largest communities surround Citadels, which is to say defensible, long-established structures with associated townships and farms, often placed at strategically and economically-significant locations. Citadels are phenomenally old, with a rich artistic history, yet also include appallingly basic and primal rituals that date back to their founding. They rely on a landed nobility which nominally rules the entire territory, presided over by a human queen who has Bound the ancient, powerful Queen demon beneath the Citadel. More details on these demons and the relevant sorcery is given below, but for now, imagine a human woman birthing 144 half-breed-demon children as an expression of her Binding to the demon Queen, as well as devouring the man who impregnates her.

Citadel culture is heavily ritualized and mannered, based on long-established tradition, the more so as one ascends the socioeconomic scale. Justice and trade practices tend to rely on "what the ancestors decided" and change usually occurs with much turmoil. People dress in silk (a common textile in Azk'Arn, obviously) in many layers and with stiffening pieces of carapace-stuff set into the fabric.

The second kind of community is called a Brood, referring to humans who live closely with demon Beasts (see below). Broods are found in the wildest parts of the landscape, where the inhabitants must brutally carve out their place in the local ecology, but are founded on innovative social arrangements. The interactions between humans, animals, and demons are mutualistic: kids are raised by worker insectoids, hunting and basic agriculture are shared responsibilities for all, and societal decisions are made with an eye toward long-term stability.

Brood culture looks more barbaric – they are hunters, gatherers, and sometimes scratch farmers – but it is often enlightened by our standards in terms of justice and cooperation. However, Broods are extremely standoff-



ish, often designating a "speaker" who, backed up by demon Beasts, is the sole person who deals with outsiders.

Citadels and Broods represent the extreme forms of community on Azk'Arn. Other towns or steadings exist that are not especially different from their equivalents in earthly history. Also, in reference specifically to Citadels, the majority of the populace are not insect-hinky at all and carry out their reproductive and family activities in ways that are perfectly familiar to us.

Combat, whether between individuals or whole armies, occurs at two extremes: ritualized, organized duels or ruthless ambushes. Much of the personal weaponry is exotic and surreal to our eyes: short swords with hooks on the underside, bolas with barbed or clingy cords, small throwing axes with a high spin factor, paired sticks for which each stick has a point on one end, ornate arming gloves, and javelins with quick-add heads and a bandolier of heads.

To the people of Azk'Arn, many of the bizarre aspects of the setting are "natural," including things like pea-pod nurseries for the royal infants and cavalry mounted on huge, gorgeous butterfly-wyverns. These insectoid-reptiloid creatures are draft animals, transportation across land, air, and water, a food source, a metal source (their blood yields iron), and more. However, sorcery *per se* is still out of most people's realm of understanding. So two levels of strangeness are to be considered: the first being what most people in the setting consider normal, and the second being the Outer Dark horror of sorcery in the classic pulp mode.

Drugs constitute a wildly diverse setting element, representing all manner

of fantasy-biotechnology including injections, transplanted glands, and pods to be immersed in. Many of them may be treated as temporary demon abilities. The one we developed through play is called *tafta*, which acts primarily as a suppressant on parasitoid development (hence suitable for a Need), but with increasing steps of intake acts as Hint, Boost Lore, and Perception.

The setting also includes an alien "energy" which manifests in several ways. In some areas, glowing lines of bluish-white force emanate across the environment, usually slanting across the ground to about ten feet high, up to a mile long. Sometimes they intersect. Just what these do, and what causes them, is generally not known. The same energies, however, may be occasionally found in battery form in ancient artifacts from long-abandoned ruins. These artifacts are usually usable as distance weapons, although that is almost certainly not their intended purpose, as they fall apart after a few uses.

Heroes

Given such a visually-elaborate and highly cultured setting, it's easy for protagonists to get lost in the shuffle. Since this mode of play is all about the heroes, though, both GMs and players should take care to remember where the camera is pointing, so to speak.

Descriptors for this setting are as follows.

- ▼ **Stamina** – as in *SORCERER & SWORD*, but substitute "Brood-born" for Savage-raised. Also add "Chemically-heightened" from the core book, specifying the drug in question.
- ▼ **Will** – as in *SORCERER & SWORD*, and add "Belief system" from the core book.
- ▼ **Lore** – as in *SORCERER & SWORD* and the core book, but substitute "Alienated" for Mad, indicating an individual who does not identify with the community in which he or she lives; also, substitute "Citadel queen's child" for Inhuman.
- ▼ **Past** – specify the strongest social ties associated with each Past; multiple Pasts are just fine.

Naming conventions in this setting include clicks and hisses. Conjunctions of consonants are fully stated (those who've learned triple-tonguing for a brass instrument will recognize the sensation), such that "Shrekt'ka" contains a whispered "kah," a "tah," and another voiced "kah" in rapid succession. The double-S is given a full aspiration, such that "Ssept" has two syllables.

MALE NAMES: Sfa, Tlek'tali, A'Krikt, Lhas'kor, Viktoz, Koorzosk't, Kteh, Banzisst'kah

FEMALE NAMES: Yenzi, Ahvienz, Kric't'la, Dendiss, Voorh, T'kah, Azenzi, Oork't

HUMANITY

Plurality again: twice over

Humanity is composed of two issues, corresponding again to the reproductive and societal sources of conflict. The first concerns reproductive values and practices, and the second concerns society-and-self. Both of these are independently plural, again, as previously described.

Humanity gain rolls arise from human-style reproductive priorities. Such priorities include things like compromise and personal affection between partners, and highly personal nurturing and sacrifice for the

benefit of children. By contrast, Humanity checks are incurred from eusocial values of reproduction. These values include quantity over quality, placing the offspring totally subordinate to parents (up to and including sterilizing them), and radical exploitation of mates (up to and including eating them). Sorcerous rituals often represent extreme forms of these behaviors.

Humanity gain rolls also come from establishing social ties of any kind with other people (not demons or insectoids). These ties can be formal or informal, and they may be of any "scale" according to the four circles described in Chapter 2; what merits the gain roll is their emotional intensity. By contrast, Humanity checks come from breaking such ties and isolating oneself as a person. Sorcerous rituals of this sort often involve altering one's own physiology and anatomy through transplants or similar tissue-hybridizations.

All sorts of relations and contradictions show up between the two types of Humanity. For instance, a courtier in a Citadel who contributes to the sorcerous power of the human Queen is dealing with Humanity checks in the first category and Humanity gain rolls in the second. Or, by contrast, a person who rebels against his family obligations in order to defy a particular

Consider the general problems faced by an individual organism in making its way in the world. Focus further on a member of a resource-limited species, whose life is long (relatively), whose time must be divided between reproduction, including the prolonged task of rearing and protecting offspring, feeding, including the securing of resources, and avoiding the fate of becoming someone else's dinner. Life is a series of extended choices between a large number of alternate behaviors ... Behavioral choices are not simply between competing drives – whether to feed or mate, fight or flee. Within any major category of behavior there is a myriad of secondary choices that must be made.

—T. Goldsmith, *The Biological Roots of Human Nature*

demonic ritual is dealing with Humanity checks in the second category and Humanity gain rolls in the first. As mentioned in Chapter 2, single actions may result in two gain rolls, two checks, or one of each.

Humanity 0

Reaching Humanity 0 offers two options in this setting, and which is employed is entirely up to the player of that character. Neither follows the default **SORCERER** method of turning the character into an NPC.

The first option is to retire the character for a session, then to bring him or her back into play with Humanity 1, no Bound demons, and with at least two descriptors re-written as the player and GM jointly agree. The neat thing about this option is that what occurred during the “off-time” is not known by anyone: players, GM, or the character. It is accessible only through character flashback – if he or she successfully tries to remember, represented by a Humanity roll against his or her own Will, then the player may provide one detail per victory regarding what happened during that time. If the roll fails, then regardless of the number of victories, the GM may provide one detail regarding what happened. The positive or negative elements of these fragmentary memories and the actions they represent are left to the player and GM.

The second option is derived from the mini-supplement *Schism* and the role-playing game *Violence Future*: upon reaching Humanity 0, the character enters “endgame” and is guaranteed to die during the following session. Also, during that final session, the character is not affected by temporary damage penalties. I highly recommend that the player throw the character into a kind of swan-song mode and choose a single priority over which the character’s life will be lost. If plain and simple damage hasn’t done the job by the end of the session, the final scene of that session must kill the character, as constructed by a discussion among all the participants in the game.

SORCERY AND DEMONS

Sorcery in Azk’Arn resembles ramped-up, disturbingly extreme biotechnology: breeding programs, forced hybrids, surgical transplants, injections of demon sera, hive-mind access, and similar ... but it’s still sorcery, and still ultimately unknowable magic, tapping into the powerful and terrifying metaphysical presence of the Queens, not science at all. It comes in two fairly separate sorts: reproduction and assimilation.

Reproductive sorcery consists of taking on the features and practices of demonic bug-style reproduction with a human mate, or actually mating with a demon. Rituals vary widely, depending on the role one is taking (for

example, a male host acting as a "mother" to a parasitoid larval demon) and on the societal acceptability of the act. The most significant example is the shared reproductive activity between the queen of a Citadel and the Queen demon associated with that Citadel, as described below.

Assimilative sorcery consists of being castrated or otherwise rendered sterile and growing horrid bug-parts of your own, all in the name of some organization you belong to. Such individuals make excellent assassins, shock troops, and, interestingly, court advisors and functionaries like judges and prefects.

The Mother-Queens

The most important, even central, demons of the setting are the Citadel Queens, which take the role of Old Ones in the terms of *SORCERER & SWORD*. They are essentially terrifyingly old, terrifyingly obscure draconic beings which exist only partly in physical reality. A successful Contact roll encounters a Power of 14–15, itself only a splinter or aspect of the unthinkable entirety of the Queen. Such an act is reliable only in prescribed places associated with the Presence, such as sacred catacombs or breeding chambers in a Citadel. Typical Desires include conquest and receiving worship, and the universal Need is for rituals that affirm the demon's association with a human being, specifically a woman who rules the Citadel and whose reproductive activities express the Queen's own Spawn ability.

The mystic otherworlds of the setting are related to these demons, in that they are simply the manifestation of the horrifically powerful minds of the Queens. The dreams and otherworldly musing of the demons may affect physical space in places of group worship and community confirmation, such as temples, royal courts, and battlegrounds. Entering such an otherworld follows the rules in *SORCERER & SWORD*.

One might Pact with a Queen in such an encounter, and the interesting trick is that the sorcerer may choose the Power that is brought to bear upon the Pact, from 6 up. Clearly, sticking with the minimum is safer, but moving higher allows the Queen to exert more abilities on the sorcerer's behalf, insofar as Lore expressed by the demon is always lower than the Power being expressed.

MIIRUN, as Contacted in a temple hidden in the palaces of Citadel Miirun, in the land of Hlesst – imagine the blackest, coiling-est, scariest dragon ever in fantasy terms, then make it thrillingly, ruthlessly female. Then make her, essentially, an insect.

Stamina 14, Will 15, Lore 14, Power 15

Desire: to be worshipped, **Need:** human queen (as above)

Telltale: what Telltale? Miirun is Miirun

Abilities at this level: Big, Protection, Command (Beasts), Confuse, Shadow, Spawn, Perceive (dreams), Perceive (parental and reproductive status), Hint, Special Damage (lethal; poison gas) at Range, Special Damage (non-lethal; coiling tail), Armor, Vitality

Also, consider the human queen of Miirun, named NASUA. She is a powerfully-built, regal woman, perfectly capable of managing the human side of ruling a vast city-state and commanding its armies.

Stamina 4 (big and vigorous), **Will 4** (brush with Unknown), **Lore 4** (functionally, Changeling), **Past** (queen of Miirun), **Humanity 4**

Price -1, unlucky in love

Telltale: occasional booming undertones in her voice

Possessors: psionic outlaws

Possessors present an exception to the model of demons and sorcery in this setting. They are autonomous “nodes” or bleed-overs of Power from a demon Queen’s mind, which take on an identity based on a human contact – often a human with unstable or poorly-monitored mental functions. The relationship between the host and his or her “new friend” is usually unwholesome in some fashion in the classic Possessor manner. Such an entity is a serious social menace, as the dual, often powerful mind is independent of the Queen and Her power structure, both sorcerous and temporal, throughout the Citadel.

Typical abilities include concealment and subtle protective, perceptual things like Cloak, Perception, Protection, Confuse, and Psychic Blast, but all of these demons also include at least one “savage” physical expression as well. The most powerful include Shapeshift, in which case the host’s Price is defined or re-written as “insane.”

GIRETT – a spider-like entity.

Stamina 5, Will 6, Lore 5, Power 6

Desire: Ruin, **Need:** puzzles

Telltale: host manifests multifaceted eyes under stress

Abilities: Perception, Protection, Confuse; Hold (webbing), Special Damage (bite)



Heidi Pogner

The latter two abilities are reserved for emergencies and are associated with physical manifestations, such as branching, arachnid legs in shadow behind the host, multiple eyes in the classic spider fashion, and similar unpleasanties.

The Children

Children of Citadel queens are produced in huge bunches and nurtured by any number of terrifying means. They are described here using human terms, although if they were re-written as Passing demons,

that wouldn't be too far off. Ultimately, only one of these children will become the new queen; the others will become sterile and metamorphose into Beast demons.

CHILDREN OF NASUA, human queen of Miirun – a whole herd of well-behaved, neatly-dressed children with bowl haircuts and serious expressions.

Stamina 2 (unnatural means), Will 6 (aristocrat), Lore 2 (inhuman), Past 6 (just kids), Price -1 (demonic)

Telltale: need you ask? They're scary kids!

Beasts: monsters and courtiers

Here's exactly what one might expect: great big bug-reptilian things ranging across an astounding variety of physical forms. What makes them more than merely the typical whacked-out fauna of Azk'Arn are their intelligence, keen insight into human needs and aspirations, and their often highly-sophisticated Desires. Their Needs tend to be crass cravings for flesh and fluids.

KOORZOSK'T'KA – a 25-foot, barrel-thick python-type creature with multifaceted eyes, a chitinous beak, and an expandable, colorful frill behind its neck.

Stamina 6, Will 7, Lore 6, Power 7

Desire: Knowledge, **Need:** flesh to eat

Telltale: beautiful, thrilling, fully human voice

Abilities: Big, Vitality, Armor, Command (small serpent-bug critters), Hint, Special Damage (coil and crush)

This category is the most variable, both physically and socially. Some of them are small and subtle enough to be defined as Inconspicuous, whereas others are relatively man-sized and, with the Cover ability, function quite well in human societies that include overt sorcery.

RR'ZZ – a mainly-humanoid imp with fly-like wings, very short legs, and oversized compound eyes.

Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5

Desire: Mischief, **Need:** sweat from its Binder's skin

Telltale: leaves little pellets or flecks stuck to surfaces

Abilities: Travel (flight), Perception (movement all around, through vibrations), Fast, Confuse

K'SS'K'TA – a man-sized mantis-like being dressed in human clothing, whose facial features are human enough to permit non-extreme expressions; note that its abilities aside from Cover are unsubtle, and it rarely uses them, preferring Cover and social interactions.

Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5

Desire: Ruin, **Need:** normal food in very large quantities

Telltale: not really necessary; it's a big man-sized bug guy

Abilities: Cover (courtier), Special Damage (non-lethal, bite), Special Damage (non-lethal, thrown barb) at Range

Another interpretation of Inconspicuous demons is a still-living body part preserved in some fashion and utilizing the human who's Bound to it as a

means for achieving its ends; this concept essentially replaces the concept of Object demons, which are not otherwise observed in the Azk'Arn setting.

ZZ'SKT – a partly-complete beetle-like demon preserved in an amber bracelet or vambrace; it can manifest briefly outside the bracelet to fly about.

Stamina 5, Will 6, Lore 5, Power 6

Desire: Community, **Need:** hormonally-rich human body fluids

Telltale: shifts and moves in its amber housing

Abilities: Travel, Warp (defined as buzz-saw rapid burrowing), Special Damage (lethal, basically applying the same burrowing to a human target), Perception (smell), Link (which includes smell as well as vision)

Parasitoids

Parasites – or rather *parasitoids*, meaning larvae who mature into Beasts, with the host being the gestation chamber and first meal – are perfect demons for this setting. Until they mature, their Stamina and Lore must be below the usual maximum, i.e., equal to or less than (Will –2) rather than (Will –1).

The drug tafta is used to moderate this process and therefore is often defined as the demon's Need. Banishing such a demon requires surgery, drastically altering one's own biochemistry, or both.

KRESH – a squirmy centipede-worm demon which implants into the host's spine through a lesion on the back of his or her neck.

Stam 4, Will 6, Lore 4, Power 6

Desire: Corruption, **Need:** tafta

Telltale: lesion on host's neck; as it matures, chitinous spikes growing along the host's spine

Abilities: Boost Stamina, Vitality (conferred to host), Special Damage (poison ooze), Hold (paralysis)

Another, very different form of Parasite is defined as surgically-implanted demon brains and glands in a human, providing a variety of abilities. This process requires the chemical or physical sterilization of the host. Eventually, the host becomes a Beast as the hybrid tissues "heal" and the human mind fades or becomes unrecognizable, remaining only as the Past ability. This form of demon replaces the concept of Passing demon types in Azk'Arn.

The process of transformation follows the guidelines for becoming a

demon in THE SORCERER'S SOUL. Banishing in this case refers to rejecting the alien tissue; if the process of transformation has progressed too far, the body parts dissociate nastily.

SS'FERE – its initial manifestation is mainly behavioral, including a crouching, fingertips-to-floor posture; later effects include branching insect-type legs from the host's ribcage and a complete loss of mammalian hair, replaced by chitinous bristles.

Stamina 4, Will 5, Lore 4, Power 5

Desire: to Worship, Need: to fight

Telltale: all the visuals described above

Abilities: Past, Taint (associated with close social interactions), Travel (wall-crawling), Vitality

Passing demons in the covert-human-disguise sense, especially those with Hop, and classical Object demons are not present in Azk'Arn.

Testimonial

... my relationship with my ex-wife was so built around roleplaying. We met at a roleplaying game when we were both teenagers, our first romp in the sack was after an intense night of roleplaying, and over the years we had sex in character way more than we did out of character. ... We both played and game-mastered male and female characters and the sexual encounters included every combination of male-female, male-male, and female-female.

Eventually ... I sorta got burned out on this style of play. She ... had an affair with the girl who was my first lover (whom I also seduced through a game), and the relationship deteriorated from then on. For her roleplaying became more and more purely a soap opera where the goal was to have two new people have sex. We divorced [a long time] ago.

[Now] I'm really keen on having some intense roleplaying where the goal isn't to get laid. I'm getting remarried to a woman who doesn't roleplay, and I'm really enjoying having the sex just be about us.



A. Bley Ingram

Chapter Six: **WAY PAST THE EDGE**

People have a hard time talking about gender among one another as well as gender-issues within fiction. The two things tend to get muddled together. Here's the way I see it: the real relationships and issues drive, create, and lend value (or confusion) to the fictional ones. It doesn't work the other way. In this chapter, the among-gender concepts regarding the real people justify and drive the extensive gender-content of the Azk'Arn setting, not the other way around.

... the fig leaf is a romance with which human optimism veils the only two eternal and changeless and rather unlovely realities of which any science can be certain.

—J. B. Cabell, *Something About Eve*

Going back to the swimming pool analogy, the Chapter 5 to Chapter 6 transition is jarring. We were submerged in the deep end, and now, we're out of the water almost entirely: sitting on the edge, perhaps, feet in the

water, looking back across and into the whole pool. This chapter goes places rarely seen in role-playing texts, using what's been presented so far. It shows how Azk'Arn setting material is actively applied during play, provides some techniques that bridge between the back-story and actually generating a story through play, and – here's the new part – gets the gender dynamics of real people enlisted into the creativity at the table, including some “rules” that conceivably could reinforce the process.

AZK'ARN REVISITED

We started play with a very abbreviated version of the Azk'Arn setting material in Chapter 5, because that's all there was; I hadn't conceived the bulk of the culture or the sorcery yet, and I wasn't sure what sort of conflicts the players wanted yet.

The next step was character discussion, among me, Tod, Julie, and Maura. Without going into gruesome detail (ever see that t-shirt, “Don't tell me about your character”?), the characters were: (1) a semi-bonkers Possessed court mage, (2) a hard-core bad-ass barbarian sort, and (3) an equally bad-ass Parasitized assassin sort. They were all fairly vague at this point, without Kickers or fully-developed demon concepts.

This step was combined as well with setting up potential scenarios, **SORCERER & SWORD** style. I provided some possible places on a sketchy map and large-scale situation ideas, with no expectation of how player-characters were to be involved. The players then had the authority to choose which one they liked best and to insert their characters into the situation

Here are the choices I suggested.

- ▼ A new religion based on altruism has arisen among the tradesfolk and laborers of a Citadel.
- ▼ A new Brood is established but is apparently preying on the local folk.
- ▼ The queen of a Citadel has disappeared.
- ▼ A noble ruler-family which has traditionally rejected sorcery is wracked by a succession-struggle.
- ▼ The war's over and the people are all dead, but no one told the demons.

All of the above were mere proposals, not a panorama of “what's happening around the game-world.” The choices that we did not pick were either eliminated from existence or tucked away and saved for later. We are talking about Situation, not Setting.

The players chime in

So the players picked the one about the queen who's disappeared, to be set in the Citadel of Miirun. They also finalized their characters, established their demons (match the names below to the demons described in Chapter 5), decided how their characters were involved, and wrote the Kickers.

- ▼ Essinal, a hostage court mage from the neighboring realm of Ondaat'kt, discovers clues that her Possessor demon, Girett, is very likely guilty of the disposal of the queen. She also has the Destiny to Serve No Queen.
- ▼ Zyzass, a court assassin of Miirun implanted with the demon Kresh, recently decided not to act upon an assignment to kill someone when she found her target was the queen; she also received warning that a rival assassin has been contracted to kill her.
- ▼ Kirikin, a Brood-born mercenary soldier, Bound to the cultish Beast demon Zz'skt, discovers a mysterious woman floating in a river and takes it upon himself to help her.

After this, I as the GM had a lot to do. I took out that map again and started filling in setting-suitable names, identifying the land as Hlesst, with its primary Citadel and settled area being Miirun. Hlesst includes several vassal states, of which the nearest is Ondaat'kt, thus providing a homeland for Essinal, and lots of unsettled area, thus providing a battleground and a site for my thinking about Kirikin's predicament.

Now for the back-story. I pulled a fantasy-game supplement off the shelf (which had done nothing *but* sit on my shelf for nigh on ten years) for a neat Citadel map, and starting thinking about who lived there and why the Queen had suddenly disappeared in mysterious circumstances involving assassins.

I decided to have the court steward disguise himself biochemically and sorcerously, as the Queen, in a quick nod to the real-world tricks of ant queens and their pheromones. This permits him to have the human Queen physically removed without alerting the hordes of demons involved, such as the Court Children. He's in cahoots with the foreign ambassador to eliminate her. All this led to making up various factions of the Court.

This is not a complex situation; in fact, it's *really* easy. I can't over-emphasize that most sword-and-sorcery stories are not mystery-puzzles. Preparing for them is not about presenting some astounding intricacy that I as GM want to show off, it's about providing a bunch of conflicts to get embroiled in, which are quickly picked up as interactions multiply.

The principals are of course the three player-characters and their three rather powerful demons listed above. Based on their Kickers and a bit of discussion, my job as GM was to come up with the NPCs, who turned out to be:

- ▼ Nasua, the queen of Miirun – a big, energetic, Frazetta-drew-her looking woman
- ▼ Children of the Miirun court – as described in Chapter 5
- ▼ Nilzaa, court steward of Miirun – arrogant and stern
- ▼ Shrekt'ka, another assassin of Miirun, Master of Hawks – a classic pulp bad-ass, intelligent and ruthless
- ▼ Krisst, ambassador from Ondaat'kt – cynical and jolly
- ▼ Zett, a demon very much like Girett, Summoned by Nilzaa, Bound to Krisst, and hosted in Shrekt'Ka – as it turned out, in passionate love with Girett and vice versa
- ▼ Bab, cook for the court of Miirun – Zyzass' friend and expert venefice

The two conspirators are pegging Essinal, the easily-manipulable Ondaat'kt hostage, as the scapegoat. The key factor is the demon Zett, which is almost identical to Essinal's, Summoned by Nilzaa, Bound by Krisst, and hosted by Shrekt'Ka, who is also being pegged as a scapegoat.

Most of Kirikin's story ended up being outside of Miirun, so he also had a bevy of NPCs to contend with in a lost, ruined citadel with more than a little resemblance to Robert E. Howard's story *Red Nails*.

- ▼ Olmar, leader of the Chotlitech clan – huge, brooding, and corrupt
- ▼ Fascia, the real ruler – the terrifying “princess” behind a generations-spanning feud
- ▼ Khemect'la, surviving member of a losing clan – utterly dehumanized by decades in the catacombs
- ▼ Nay'Ar, a warrior of the Chotlitech
- ▼ Rindric – captain of the Azakstani mercenary troop
- ▼ Sfa – captain of the mercenary troop fighting the Azakstani

ACTUAL PLAY

At last, preparation moves into real play. This is **SORCERER**, so the story is expected to emerge via actions of the protagonists, as played by people who are committed to this goal. Nothing about outcomes of the story can be pre-fixed, and very little about the fundamental conflicts can be pre-fixed either. All GM-derived material is just that, material. This is not to say that NPCs do nothing; but what they do occurs so that the players may use it to produce the story.

Basic techniques

First, before play, back off. The player-characters' Kickers already introduce dilemmas and moral hassles, so the story is already happening. Rather than

adapting or manipulating characters to fit the scenario, the GM should do the reverse.

Second, during play, right from the very first minute, step it up. Nothing about playing bass is passive or boring. Start role-playing those Kickers, or just post-Kicker, with great pressure and with lots of new material that you're ready with. Practice and master the following techniques: Bangs, Crosses, Weavings, Openings, and Bobs. I'm borrowing freely from both boxing and quilting for these terms, with no particular need for an exact analogy across the hobbies.

Bangs have already been described in the previous *SORCERER* books. The GM does well to bring a list of potential Bangs, a bandolier as I like to call it, into a given session. At this point, they remain merely potential. Some will get used, some won't, and some will get used in ways you didn't anticipate. Since Bangs don't exist until they happen in-play, don't over-value them before you decide actually to use them. The usual problem is over-preparing in terms of when and how to apply them, rather than remaining "at the ready" and using player-character actions as cues. When you use a Bang, remember that its point is provide at least one player with a real decision.

Crosses refer to elements or results of one scene being used in another scene. For instance, consider character A interacting with some NPC A in scene A, during which NPC A storms out of the scene. There you are, role-playing with character B in scene B, and NPC A comes stamping and cursing into scene B. He might be completely in the background, or he might intrude, it doesn't matter – you have a Cross. Crosses may also include indirect effects, such as calling attention to the vapor-trail or crater left by actions in scene A during the playing of scene B; such things are Crosses when different player-characters are present in the two scenes.

Essinal, the unhinged court mage, has made herself unwelcome to the Children of the Miirun court, and a fair horde of them is looking for her in the spooky halls of the palaces in the Citadel. Meanwhile, Zyzass, the assassin, is engaged in a mutual, subtle stalking-hunt with the assassin who's been slated to kill her, Shrekt'Ka.

Here comes my Cross: Zyzass encounters the Children, who speak to her regarding a "buzzy lady," whom they perceive to have hurt their mother. When Shrekt'Ka and Zyzass meet, she happens to make her Lore roll regarding his Possessor's Telltale, a buzzing undertone to his voice.

(Remember? I'd decided that Shrekt'Ka was possessed too, by Zett, a demon very much like Girett.)

Therefore, not only were characters' physical paths Crossed, but among-player information was Crossed as well. Zyzass knew nothing about the

two buzzy-voiced Possessor demons, but as of this event, all the players now did.

Crossing maintains the author-audience relationship with one another, regardless of which character is on-stage at the moment, and generates all sorts of communication among players, which the characters do not have to understand.

Weavings refer to bringing separate conflicts toward one another, as well as intensifying the conflicts toward climax. At its most extreme, Weaving may involve snap changes to the GM's concept of what's going on, but more often, it's a matter of making NPC decisions and delivering the consequences of those decisions. I like to call early Weaving "spiking" the Kicker, which is to say, nearly any Kicker involves persons besides the player-character, so whatever they do next constitutes a Weave. Weaving can also involve some time and space manipulation, especially in terms of when a given player-character enters a current scene.

I next focused on Essinal, hitting her with blandishments from Krisst and bullying from Nilzaa – revealing not only their coup-agenda, but also showing that their alliance was falling apart. This is Weaving: tightening things, putting pressure on Essinal's player to move to a decision-point. I'm working with the two Possessor demons being pretty spunky at this point, and musing about a complex Will conflict among the two conspirators, the two demons, and Essinal.

Openings refer to opportunities for the players to contribute – not merely to react, but to suggest primary actions that define new conflicts and even new scenes. In other words, players can Weave too. In fact, players are much better than most GMs think at managing "coincidence" to keep all the in-game decisions phrased and justified within the characters' frame of reference. As long as the GM provides Openings, the players will bring their characters together in terms of effect and story, if not necessarily in terms of grouping-up or teaming-up.

I decided to turn the next events over to the players, just letting the player-character movements ("who they want to talk to") decide the next scenes. As it happens, the players essentially engineered a meeting between Essinal and Shrekt'Ka, which is to say, deviating from and effectively canceling my tentative musing regarding a savage showdown between the two assassins.

As a rule, I stick to the principle that, after a Weave, an Opening is usually the best option.

Bobs refer to delaying, belying, or denying various things or events; “keeping secrets,” or inserting “rests.” Real-life fighting, music, and sex all teach us the same lesson, which is to say, once in a while, chill. Not all in-game actions must frenetically drive toward a climax. The goal of a Bob is not to stonewall, but rather to pace and to permit everyone to enjoy all of the Weaving so far, as well as giving everyone time to consider what to do next. Bobbing can apply to one player at a time, for instance in order to give another player an Opening, or it can apply to the entire group, including the GM. Sometimes resting all the action as someone role-plays a bard singing a pretty song is the best way to pump up the action when it hits again.

Bobs are especially useful to allow players to express details about their characters – what they do when nothing is bustin’ down the walls or when no horrible secrets are unfolding before their eyes. One of my favorites in this particular story was simply Essinal getting a haircut and a makeover from some servants, but that came well after the sequence I’m currently using for examples.

Before the characters finally all faced one another, Essinal confronted her Possessor demon to come clean about its doings. I had Girett, the demon, shut up like a bear trap: my Bob. This was partly due to roll results (the demon won the Will contest), but it was also just right for letting me think a bit about what would happen when the two Possessors come face to face. I was also listening to my own non-verbal creative instincts – an idea was itching at me, but I wasn’t sure what. When this happens, a Bob is always recommended.

Some role-playing groups place the responsibility for all these things on the GM during all points of play. However, in playing *SORCERER*, the GM does well to concentrate on Bangs, Crosses, Bobs, and Openings, and sooner or later the players turn those Openings into Weavings, which themselves evolve into further Bangs.

So next up, Zyzass brought Shrekt’Ka, possessed by Zett, to Essinal, possessed by Girett. And wham, the idea itching at me revealed itself: the demons are in love! Ha! I exulted inwardly and called for Will contests, which both hosts lost – and the two human characters hurled themselves into one another’s arms, necking furiously.

Until that moment, I was pretty tentative about the two demon charac-

ters, and I'd given no thought at all to Shrekt'Ka aside from his potential confrontational role toward Zyzass. Giving the players the Opening described earlier acted as a springboard for me, creating a wonderful Bang.

Looking at the session from which the above example is taken, it's impossible to tease apart just who presented "story" for anyone else. Who was the author? All of us. Who were the audience? The same. Using the techniques described here allows me to rely on prep when I need to, and on inspiration when it hits, without the two getting into one another's way.

Scene cutting

Scene cutting is the great GM technique for SORCERER play. Rather than thinking of the resultant story as a chained set of linear scenes, think of scenes that mainly overlap, at all times. They end at the same or different times and give rise to new ones, but quite likely two to five of them are occurring at any given moment.

How's this done? First, start several scenes in rapid succession. Then play one in detail until a decision has to be made, that is, until a Bang strikes, and the player considers or begins to deal with it. Then cut to another scene, play it for a while, and then do it again, cutting to a third. Repeat. Basically, you're playing all the scenes simultaneously, switching back and forth among them as Bangs arise and are dealt with.

Do not use traditional RPG scene endings as the cue to cut. That would mean finishing, say, a combat, in full, until one of the combatants goes down, before switching over to the other player-character. Instead, switch over during the fight, at a moment of interest or impact, like, "You crash through the fence and skid over the edge of the chasm. Can you hang on? Roll!" The player rolls, and you leave the character hanging by his fingernails or plummeting downward, and cut fast to the other guy who's staring in shock at the husband who'd caught him in bed with his wife.

Dice are your friend in deciding when to cut. SORCERER play is rife with unexpected reversals, such as a two-dice roll getting Total Victory over seven or eight dice. The dramatic in-game content that results from such things often signals a fine time to switch over to the parallel scene.

Crossing is the primary technique for making scene cutting work. Let players suggest Crosses, and for that matter, consider anyone's advice or suggestions regarding when to cut.

The net effect is to focus *everyone's* attention on *all* of the play that's occurring. You will find that players will angle their scenes towards one another, and the "group" will "come together" in a much more reasonable, interesting way than if you tie their belts together so they'll all be together



Jeremy McHugh

for some pre-planned combat scene. Scene cutting provides the context for Crosses and Weavings to be a group effort, which allows the GM to choose (or invent) exactly the perfect Bangs.

In our game

What happened? What conflicts got established through the players' decisions and my various levels of input during play? Basically, there were two demon Queens involved: Miirun herself, back at the Citadel, and Zochat'lan, the all-but-moribund Queen of a dying, secret, mainly-underground society which was racked by feuds. In each case, someone was co-opting the Queen's identity for personal power: in Miirun, it was Nilzaa, as described earlier, and in Zochat'lan, it was Fascia, the gender-bending manipulator of the feuding clans. Each of these situations was unstable, and various NPC and player-character input brought both to the boiling point.

As play progressed, a few more NPCs were added to the mix, mainly to provide information across separated player-characters and to add pressure, i.e., Crosses and Weavings.

- ▼ Vassth, Hawkriders – Shrekt'ka's spy and Chosk's lover
- ▼ Chosk, high priestess of Miirun – Vassth's lover
- ▼ Ssept, priest of Miirun, master of the Festival of Lights – ambitious and spiteful, in political cahoots with Nilzaa
- ▼ Issifere, master of the Kreshite myrmidons – old, deadly, and sinister
- ▼ Idazz, a Hawkriders, Vassth's brother – young and feisty
- ▼ Enk't, a Hawkriders – quarrelsome and gloomy

I won't bore you with a summary of the events of play. It doesn't matter, really, what happens to the NPCs and the situations – the point is what happens to the main characters, and how we all discover who they are in the most dramatic sword-and-sorcery terms. Here's how the characters' various conflicts ultimately worked out.

- ▼ Essinal and Shrekt'Ka became lovers, at the expense of the two Possessor demons, now both Bound by Essinal, and at the service of her Destiny.
- ▼ Zyzass became a wandering outcast, scarred with unmistakable demon-markings but without a Bound demon (removed through some very repulsive surgery).
- ▼ Kirikin was instated as Nasua's consort at Miirun, but their first official love-night become a demon-mating feast-night between Miirun and Kirikin's Bound demon, Zz'skt. This event precipitated both Shrekt'Ka and Zyzass fleeing the Citadel.

What sort of inter-player interactions made all this happen? It was all in-character role-playing blended informally with out-of-character cross-plotting and suggestions, with me using all the techniques described above and playing the NPCs as fast, hard, and colorfully as possible.

Kirikin and Zyzass in particular Crossed paths at two crucial points, neither amicably, and each time defining multiple further conflicts. These players' input, while directing the actions and making the decisions for two very different, geographically-separated protagonists, established how Nasua gets back to Miirun, and under what circumstances.

One of the most notable game mechanics was the **SORCERER & SWORD** "goal" rule, which permits increasing a character's Price for an ongoing bonus regarding a given conflict. Kirikin received four extra dice to restore Nasua to her throne, thus having his Price of Uncivilized hit –5 dice, and Zyzass ended her story by doing similarly, getting four extra dice to find her place in the world, ramping up her Bad Reputation to –5 dice. In tandem with Humanity shifts, Destiny, and other descriptors, the goals led to great physical character transformations, visually. Essinal changed from a scruffy-haired, mumbling waif into a blazing-eyed lover with an arching spider-shadow, Kirikin became a terrifying savage even as he became a royal consort, and Zyzass changed from a smooth and poised court-assistant to a brooding exile sporting insect-like spines and spikes on her face and back.

When does gender-based theme emerge? How does it happen without being pre-fixed by setting and conflict-preparation? Here's the path of getting content into the game:

1. Setting-ish pre-character prep
 2. Character prep
 3. Scenario prep
 4. Actual play #1 (establishing tons of setting)
 5. Reflect and prep for the next session
 6. Actual play #2 (establishing tons of setting)
- ... and so on.

The two extremes are easy to understand. The first is highly specified and early-prepped, for which both *Paragon* and *In Utero* are examples, necessarily. This extreme is prone to stereotyping and “paint by numbers.” The other extreme is to leave all sorts of gender issues available in what initially appears to be a big mess, and to let it develop as play progresses. The danger of this extreme is that, if the inter-personal dynamics of the real people don’t get engaged, it can end up diffused, saying nothing. People must find the point or points from 1 to 6 above that work best for a given group.

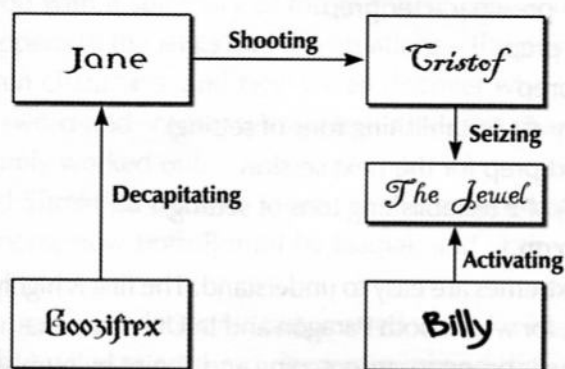
In our case, theme was left to very late in the process, taking the riskier path. What themes did emerge? Bearing in mind that all of this is retrospective, looking at our story as if it were a novel or comic that I’d read, here’s what I see. Human love is expressed through sacrifice and loss, not sexual consummation. Zyzass parted from her place in the world and her best friend (Bab), Essinal and Shrekt’Ka were parted when he fled the Citadel to save a number of people’s lives, and Kirikin also ended up in a bad situation, breaking Nasua’s heart in order to avoid being eaten by Miirun. Whereas, although sexual encounters were strewn throughout play, none of them capped or resolved any of the Humanity issues.

“Love hurts, and it probably won’t make you happy, but it beats being a bug.”

Dice diagrams

Over the years, I hit upon a mighty useful concept to help with playing *SORCERER*: little diagrams to map out inter-related conflicts. They aren’t anything too special, not new rules at all, but they’re just right for organizing oneself during play.

All it takes is writing out all the characters, player-characters and NPCs alike, for whom rolls are being made, with an arrow toward the person or whatever which will be rolling defensively. If Jane is shooting Cristof, Cristof is seizing the jewel, Billy is mentally activating the jewel, and Goozifrex is decapitating Jane ... and if the jewel does something pretty important, then the diagram might look like this.



Resolution is handled just as in the *SORCERER* combat rules, which are really just “complex conflict” rules anyway. If order of action matters, use the high-values as in those rules. The really important thing, though, in most non-combat complex conflicts, is looking at how many victories are involved in the successful rolls.

For instance, let’s say that jewel gets activated right off the bat, and that its effect is to blow off everyone’s heads, excepting Billy’s, in a gruesome splatter. What now? The point is that the jewel’s effect isn’t a pre-stated action in the scene, it’s a condition brought into effect by Billy’s action. It can’t be “added in” as a new, now-it’s-here action, not in *SORCERER*. We can’t permit all those stated actions to be canceled and eliminated, like un-persons in a totalitarian regime. They matter – a player’s stated action has weight in this game, and the only way for it to be canceled are (a) if the character is penalized beyond recovery by another pre-stated action before the action occurs or (b) if the player cancels the action to switch to defense.

Here’s where the diagram helps. Everyone’s rolled already, right? Go ahead and carry out all the defensive rolls, including aborting actions and so forth if anyone wants to. Probably some people will want to abort to a defensive roll against the jewel, but perhaps some don’t.

For the ones that do, no problem – roll and see who goes splat. For the ones that don’t, though, the real question is whether their stated actions occur and to what extent. Roll their defensive dice (one each), and compare the victories of the jewel, if any, to the victories of the characters’ actions, if any. In other words, if (say) Jane does not abort her action, here’s what might happen: the jewel has rolled, um, 9, 6, 4, 4. Jane rolls one die against it, getting an 8 – the jewel has “hit” her for one die of Lethal Special Damage. Does her head go splat? Check the table, her Stamina, and so on, and find out. But! The real question is whether her bullet hits Cristof – he’s failed his defensive roll, let’s say, and she’s hit him for three victories. Three victories

on the bullet beats one for the jewel, so we'll say that her shot goes off effectively before the jewel's effect on her takes place.

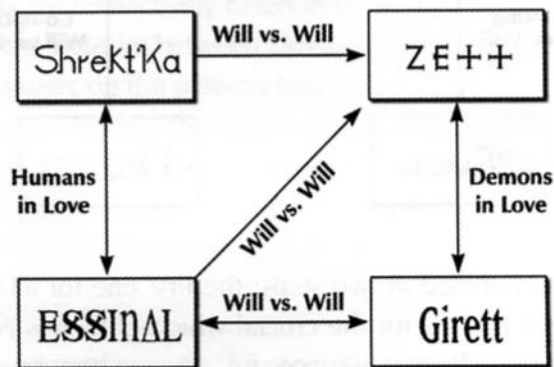
What's the point of this approach? It completely removes any need for switching actions in the middle of a big exchange *through dialogue only*, which has a terrible way of degenerating into who-shouts-first in many role-playing situations, or, only marginally better, devolving all the resolutions into GM fiat. By having all the rolls' victories in place, we've established an *action environment*, defined not only by order but by intensity as well, into which secondary effects or conditions can be inserted.

The technique is especially useful when no reactive-defensive rolls are involved: just comparing a whole bunch of simultaneous or near-simultaneous influences. A typical use might be to resolve a big debate, to see who gets his or her way, who convinced whom of what, and what the pecking order looks like afterwards. Doing this is very easy: just see who succeeded, and rate the outcomes by the number of victories involved.

THE TWO-POSSESSOR PROBLEM

Later in the story, Essinal and Shrekt'Ka apparently found enough regard for one another to turn their initial demon-driven sexual relationship into an emotional one between themselves; Essinal used this change in her life to drive an attempt to Bind Zett away from Krisst, its master.

The conflict is expressed as a Will vs. Will roll between Shrekt'Ka and Zett, a Will vs. Will roll between Essinal and Girett, a Humanity roll between Shrekt'Ka and Essinal, a "demons in love" roll between Zett and Girett, and finally, a Will roll between Essinal and Zett to see whether it would break its Binding to Krisst. All but the final roll were made simultaneously, placing various victories as bonuses to one side or another of the final conflict.



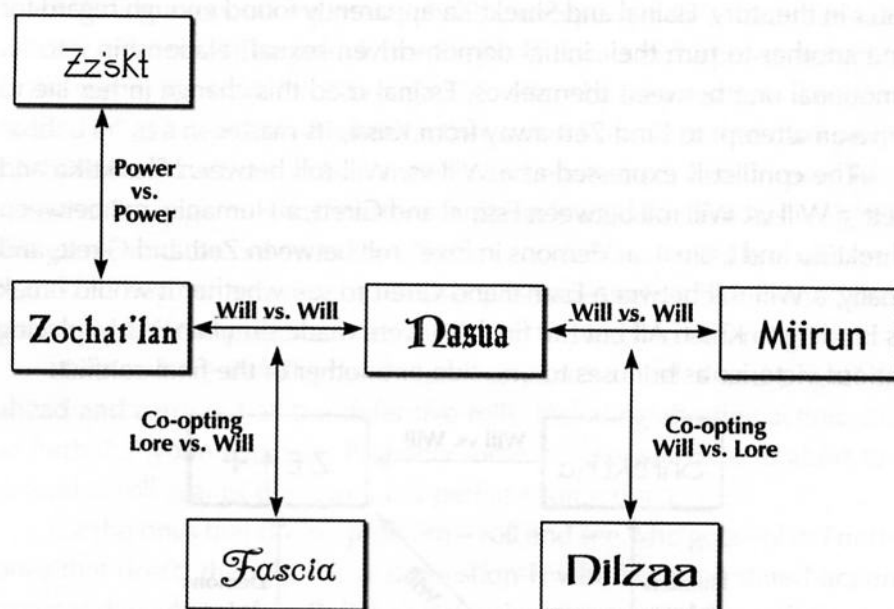
What happened? Enough victories were gained by the human-to-demon Will challenges, as well as by the humans' commitment to one another, to give Essinal a gruesomely high victory over Zett, which itself lent Zett many

bonus dice to rebel against and break the Binding to Krisst. The demon was then Bound by Essinal, forced out of Shrekt'Ka's body, and placed into a Contain.

THE TWO-QUEEN CO-OPTION RITUALS

All this happened about halfway through the story, when Kirikin and Nasua were still trapped in the ruined Citadel of Zochat'lan.

Nasua is psychically Linked to and Pacted with the demon-queen Miirun, but she's physically near and able to communicate with the demon-queen Zochat'lan; a Will struggle is occurring to see which Queen Nasua will be identified with. This is a big deal for a couple of NPCs, who have staked everything they want on this issue. Nilzaa, back in Miirun, has performed a ritual to co-opt Nasua's relationship with Miirun, and here in Zochat'lan, Fascia is performing a ritual to co-opt the relationship with Zochat'lan. Again, these two are oppositional; only one will occur. Also, just to muddy things up, the demon Zz'skt is engaged in an ability-struggle with Zochat'lan, Power on Power.



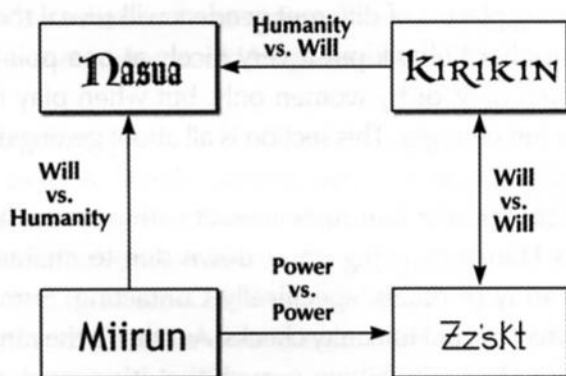
This set was best handled in two steps: the first one for all the modifying rolls, and the second one for the crucial which-Queen-is-Nasua conflict. Zz'skt's roll (Power vs. Power), if successful, acts as a bonus to Nasua against Miirun; Fascia's roll (Lore vs. Miruun's Will), if successful, makes Fascia fully into a woman and permits her to Pact with Zochat'lan, acting as a penalty to Nasua against Zochat'lan; and Nilzaa's roll, if successful, permits him to be perceived as a woman-queen and to Pact with Miirun, acting as a penalty

to Nasua against Miirun. All of these rolls, once made, set up the final dice totals for Zochat'lan vs. Nasua (Power vs. Lore, as per a Contact) and Miirun vs. Nasua (Will vs. Will, also modified by the existing Pacting strength).

As it turned out, Fascia's roll beat Nilzaa's in terms of victories; hence his co-option failed and hers succeeded. However, Zz'skt sufficiently distracted Zochat'lan such that several victories were added to Nasua's roll against that demon, and her re-confirming the Pact with Miirun beat out Zochat'lan.

THE QUEEN-MATING RITUAL

The four actions are: Kirikin and Nasua are consummating their wedding night; Nasua is Pacted to Miirun, who directs Nasua to kill and eat Kirikin during the sexual contact; Kirikin is Bound to his demon Zz'skt, who is back-ing Miirun; and the two demons are mating. Unlike the above example, all the rolls were made simultaneously.



The rolls turned out as follows: the Pacting and the Binding bonuses solidly favored the demons' Will scores against their respective humans, the victories from those rolls are respectively rolled into the demon-demon mating roll, overwhelming the victories between Kirikin and Nasua despite some notable role-playing bonuses on the player's part.

So what happened was that Kirikin sees Nasua's actual love for him slip away and transform, physically and horribly, into the mating-driven hunger of an insectoid demon Queen.

PLAYER-GENDER RULES

Look back over all that stuff – see how much interpersonal interaction, mutually supportive and mutually challenging, was going on, among the group. Recall that two of us were men, two of us women. Realize that, in-game, a great deal of kissing, screwing, embracing, and swearing of undying passion went on among a variety of player-characters, non-player-characters, and

demons. In GMing some of all that, I took the real-people gender into account in a very direct, mechanical way.

A man without a woman is like a tugboat in a logjam. A woman without a man is like a fish run over by a bicycle.

—M. Groening, Love is Hell

The time has come to dis-
close the Horrible, Awful, Sexist-Discriminatory rules as promised for this supplement – different rules-sets based on the gender of the actual players. When I first began hinting about this on-line, oh, you wouldn't believe how many people clutched their hair and alternately grieved and swore how intolerable and insupportable any such thing would be. They had immediately assumed that these rules would dictate what either gender of player, especially the female one, would *not* be permitted to do.

However, the goal is exactly the opposite. I'm aiming at more attention and enjoyment to various options during play, not less, as only cross-character interactions among players of different genders will reveal the full range of the rules. Christopher Kubasik put it very nicely at one point: Twister can be played by men only, or by women only, but when play includes both sexes, lots more fun emerges. This section is all about getting that effect into role-playing.

In *SORCERER*, three or four rules interact with one another constantly. One of them is Humanity going up or down due to character behavior. Another is the array of rituals, specifically Contacting, Summoning, and Binding, all of which incur Humanity checks. Another is the range of possible consequences for Humanity hitting 0, such that it's conceivably desirable and fun to do so (although never trivial). And finally, the Binding rules link relationships among sorcerers and demons in order to push Humanity-oriented decisions. In these terms, let's take the Azk'Arn setting and twist its tail a bit.

- ▼ Male players' characters, if they perform a Binding in conjunction with a female player's character's help, do not suffer Humanity checks for Binding. Conversely, female players' characters, if they perform a Contacting in conjunction with a male player's character's help, do not suffer Humanity checks for Contacting.
- ▼ If any player's character performs a Banishing without the help of another player of the other gender, that character incurs a Humanity check roll instead of a Humanity gain for the Banishing.
- ▼ If a player-character hits Humanity 0, "the story" of what happens must include a player-character played by a player of the opposite gender of the first player, or the Humanity-0 character is lost per the standard *SORCERER* rules.

Any of these might be reversed in gender and have the same effect, which is part of my point. I am not making any specific gender statement *with* these rules, except for the all-important one that male and female players have incentive to interact with one another across the gaming table, to achieve in-game effects that would otherwise be inaccessible. It's no more than engine for Crosses and Weavings. Also, in-game gender content doesn't mean anything in terms of these rules. They carry their own, metagame, among-persons power that applies even to a role-playing game whose content is basically gender-neutral, or close to it. Granted, the Azk'Arn setting fairly reeks of the two gender-heavy story types, and in the very next section, I'll muddy the waters by linking these rules to an in-game gender issue, but that's a tweak of my own and not fundamental to the rules themselves.

For those of you who are staring, crestfallen, at how basic, straightforward, and "un-innovative" this is, consider this: what role-playing design has ever admitted that such an action (male players and female players cooperating on something) could be given an incentive?

Take it to necromancy

Necromancy as such, literally dealing with "the dead," is not a developed sorcery on Azk'Arn. However, the necromancy *rules* in *SORCERER & SWORD* are used as the framework for demon-demon reproduction. Instead of death and sacrifice, the crucial act is a human reproductive effort which gets identified and linked with a demon-demon reproductive act. Token "objects" are produced by whatever means the sorcerer employs to mediate or participate in the demon-demon mating. They may be any object used as a representative symbol of the reproductive act or commitment, actual human infants, or even body parts. All of the Token rules apply in full; its initial Power is set by rolling the parent-demon's Powers against one another. It doesn't matter which wins – just the number of victories, which sets the Power.

Here's something even wilder: the offspring of demon-demon reproduction are constructed using the Angel rules from Chapter 3 in *THE SORCERER'S SOUL*. Their roles are defined as Warrior or Avenger, and the Higher Goal is always Unfathomable. Their features are set according to the demon-rules options, using Power rather than Grace rules. Their Type, however, is set by demon standards, specifically that of an Azk'Arn Beast as described in Chapter 5 in this supplement, and any suitable demonic abilities are permitted along with the angelic ones. They are intended to provide an idealistic ray of hope in the uncompromisingly savage and bizarre world – but only a ray, considering their bestial Needs and, to us, Unfathomable ultimate goals.

When the demon is created, it's made up by the GM from scratch, using the guidelines above. In addition, however, its Will vs. the Token generated

by its birth rituals. If the Token wins, then the demon's Power is increased by the number of victories.

VISKASSTH'KOH

Higher goal: Unfathomable, **Type:** Warrior

Type: Beast

Stamina 6, **Will** 7, **Lore** 6, **Power** 10

Abilities: Travel, Perceive (stop time), Restore, Perceive (across distance), Bless; also, the demon ability Hold (paralyzing stare)

The Token is defined as a glowing star-object, which hangs over the general area where the angel/demon is present. In this case, the Token's strength is 4, and its effect on Viskassth'Koh's Power, due to a rather wicked roll, was to add 3 for a total of 10.

It was birthed during the second Azk'Arn story, not described in this supplement, but its game-creation began during the events of the first, specifically when Essinal Bound and hosted the two Possessor demons simultaneously.

Finally (and to get to the point), these rules also require inter-gender play to make the in-game event happen. For instance, Girett and Zett did breed – I'm a guy and Maura, who played Essinal, is a woman. However, Miirun and Zz'skt did not – because Tod and I are both guys.

Wrap it up

As stated earlier, the player-gender rules are pure metagame. The in-game content is not "causing" anything and may not have anything to do with sexuality at all. But if you use these rules, or anything like them, then the flow from the real world into the game-content becomes stronger, more exciting, and about more stuff. Once that happens, then any sexual and gender-oriented content in the imagined game-stuff itself, if present, gains more emotional backing and integrity as a story.

Despite the consistently positive and fruitful results that I've observed and experienced during play itself, the main reaction I've encountered to these ideas in discussions is fear. Not refutation, not disagreement – fear. People ask, is all this ... safe? Aren't whole shelves full of wriggling cans of worms just waiting to open? Can #1 might contain the fact that everyone at the table might not agree about gender and sex issues. Can #2 might contain all manner of re-arranged social dynamics among the people.

I have a straightforward answer for them. Yes, those and many other

cans are waiting on those shelves. However, I also claim that they are already there and already active during play, even play which tries to deny them. All the Testimonials confirm my claim. The choice is clear: either the cans' contents blind-side the group and screw up the game, or they are put to artistic use with full knowledge.

No, it's not safe. Bluntly? Screw "safe." People are not safe. We are spunky, funky social primates, and *SORCERER*, more than any other role-playing game, is built to reflect that. This is rock-and-roll role-playing. Bring the dangerous, brilliant, and altogether human elements of real-people interaction into its play, and the actual play can yield actual meaning, as opposed to pre-programmed pablum or some vague-ass escapist noise.

Here's one chord. Here's another one. Now get out there and start your own band.

Testimonial

My wife and I play in the same gaming group regularly. That has an odd dynamic, something like having a family member in a class you're teaching. There's pressure to focus on them so that they have a good time, but there's also pressure not to show favoritism, which often leads to confusion, mixed messages, and alternating "good time, bad time" dynamics with said spouse. A lot of this, as with most things, can be worked out through decent communication.

Many have noted that "the problem with gaming with a girlfriend" (I'd add wives to some degree) is that there is an unspoken pressure to have a similar relationship with them in-game, or at least to preclude such relationships with other characters in-game. This causes a very annoying dynamic, as even if no one is offended, all are walking on eggshells "just in case." We've had a few games where this was quite an issue.

Here's an example. James and Sharon have been together for some time. Sharon is considering ending the relationship, but it hasn't gone too far yet and James has no idea. In the game, James's character is the captain of a military detachment in a foreign land. I played his first sergeant, and Sharon was a horse thief who had been caught by James and his men, but who had romanced/seduced James. Her character had since become a hanger-on of sorts with our little traveling unit. My character was ugly as sin and crude to boot ... snot, swearing, smelly, and so on.

James is trying to resist her seduction in-game. She's milking it for all it's worth. The GM is really pushing this with sick glee. Then I decide for my character to hit on hers, thinking that she'd never go for my dang ugly character ... but she does. Suddenly there's this romance and sort-of-love-affair between my character and Sharon's. James's character and mine end up at pretty massive odds with each other, which is more complicated by the fact that his character

is very powerful as well as being my military captain, and mine is defined as highly committed to him as such.

Some great in-game violence, threats, fiascos, and other fun bits and pieces occur, but we all end up under the impression that James isn't comfortable with it. He's irritated by the way his significant other is treating him in-game (the GM de-protagonized James quite a bit by essentially forcing him to be seduced via very difficult rolls vs. Sharon), and I think he was bothered by someone – even a married friend – virtually hitting on his virtual girlfriend. I heard later from Sharon that they even had a brief argument about whether or not he was uncomfortable – he said he wasn't, but obviously was.

He and Sharon broke up about two months later. While I don't think the game contributed to the breakup that much (it was coming regardless), I think that it added a kind of tension that made it more obvious to everyone. What's funny is that I don't think her plans to break up with him really even affected the in-game responses . . . she took on a different character, but even the GM tried to push them together. When I got involved, the GM saw it as a chance to cause trouble, and that's how he used it. James didn't want any of it, but his "natural" role with Sharon led us all to it.



APPENDIXES

GAMES

Adept Press publishes more games besides *SORCERER*, did you know?

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

Described as the funniest cry of frustrated hate in gaming. Sometimes, hilarity exists just to mask the pain.

Trollbabe (<http://www.adept-press.com/trollbabe>)

Full of laughs, wit, wisdom, violence, and large women with horns and edged weapons. And webcomix, too!

Don't miss out

Here's a sampling of the wide diversity and stunning quality of creator-owned role-playing games. People write'em, publish'em, sell'em, and see 'em played – which sounds like *The Industry* to me.

- ▼ *Little Fears*, from Key 20 Publishing (<http://www.key20.com>)
- ▼ *Kayfabe*, from Errant Knight Games (<http://www.angelfire.com/games3/errantknight/>)

- ▼ *The Riddle of Steel*, from Driftwood Publishing
(<http://www.theriddleofsteel.net>)
- ▼ *Universalis*, from Ramshead Publishing (<http://universalis.actionroll.com>)
- ▼ *Obsidian*, from the Apophis Consortium
(<http://www.apophisconsortium.com>)
- ▼ *Paladin and Donjon*, from Anvilwerks (<http://www.anvilwerks.com>)
- ▼ *The Pool and The Questing Beast*, from Random Order Creations
(<http://www.randomordercreations.com>)
- ▼ *JAGS* (<http://jagsgame.dyndns.org/jags/index.jsp>)
- ▼ *Dust Devils*, from Chimera Creative (<http://www.chimera.info>)
- ▼ *Hero Quest* (formerly *Hero Wars*), from Issaries Inc.
(<http://www.glorantha.com>)
- ▼ *InSpectres* and *OctaNe*, from Memento-Mori
(<http://www.memento-mori.com>)
- ▼ *HeartQuest*, from Seraphim Guard (<http://www.seraphimguard.com>)
- ▼ *Fudge*, from Grey Ghost Games (<http://www.fudgerpg.com>)
- ▼ *Violence Future*, *The Hunt*, and *Charts & Charts*, from Unfortunate Destinies (<http://www.unfortunatedestinies.com>)
- ▼ *The Godsend Agenda*, from Khephera Publishing
(<http://www.godsend-agenda.com>)
- ▼ *Children of the Sun*, from Misguided Games
(<http://www.misguidedgames.com>)
- ▼ *Cthonian*, *Fungeon*, and *Shadows*, from Harlekin-Maus Games
(<http://www.harlekin-maus.com>)
- ▼ *Dead Meat* and *Two-Page Action Movie*, from Destroy All Games
(<http://geocities.com/unodiablobrew>)
- ▼ *Arrowflight*, from Deep 7 (<http://www.deep7.com>)
- ▼ *EABA*, from BTRC (<http://www.btrc.com>)
- ▼ *Multiverser*, from Valdron Inc (<http://www.multiverser.com>)

Make sure to stop by The Forge (<http://www.indie-rpgs.com>) to learn more, to find yet more games, to participate in the discussions, and who knows? Maybe to publish your own.

MORE REFERENCES

Books

John Bellairs – *The Figure in the Shadows*, *The Ghost in the Mirror*, and *The House with a Clock in its Walls*, wonderful kids' horror and fantasy

Wilkie Collins – *No Name*, Collins' harshest and cleanest novel.

Lajos Egri – *The Art of Dramatic Writing*, in my view the foundation text about passion-driven, audience-grabbing story creation.

John D. MacDonald – *The Girl, The Gold Watch, and Everything*, a fine example of the classic Object demon in action.

Garth Nix – *Sabriel, Lirael*, and the upcoming *Abhorsen*, excellent teen fantasy full of uncompromising necromancy.

Arturo Perez-Reverte – *The Club Dumas*, the novel upon which *The Ninth Gate* was based.

John Skipp and Craig Spector – *The Cleanup*, a novel I wish I'd read before writing *THE SORCERER'S SOUL*.

Sylvia Townsend Warner – *Kingdoms of Elfin*, a collection of short stories about the interface between humans and Faerie.

Comics

Creature Tech (Top Shelf Production) – bugs and demons! Plus lots of stuff about souls.

The Marquis (Oni Press) – wonderful, soul-ripping, flesh-warping horror in semi-historical late-medieval France.

Midnight Nation (Top Cow Comics / Image Comics) – oh, the angst of demonic power o'ertaking one's body, while ambling across the United States with a hot, mysterious, butt-kicking woman, on a quest for one's soul! And similar.

The Sacred and the Profane (Epic Comics) – all about the ultimate unknowability of the Void, and how religion may or may not provide a path to deal with it. If that's too abstract for you, then I'll just say, spaceships and tentacles.

Usagi Yojimbo (Dark Horse Publishing) – everyone's favorite samurai rabbit. I'm citing it here in reference to the supporting character Jei, whose obsessions and abilities give off a distinctly *SORCERER* whiff.

Film and television

Batman: the Animated Series – the finest expression of this character ever, in my view, with the obsessions (check out that Wayne gravestone!) captured

perfectly in angular black shadows. The associated movie, *Mask of the Phantom*, is most highly recommended.

Cat People – the original movie released in 1942, one of the tightest, most moving demonic love stories ever filmed.

Demons – film, reality, fantasy, terror, and raw blood and vomit. All right, maybe this movie doesn't have it *all*, but it sure has what it has like nothing else.

The Incubus – a beautiful demon tries to damn the soul of a good man, but instead falls in love with him. Besides, it's in Esperanto; how bizarre is that?

The Irrefutable Truth About Demons – I'm breaking a personal rule by recommending something I haven't seen yet, but given the title, can you blame me?

Let Sleeping Corpses Lie (original title: *No Molestan Los Sueños de los Muertos*) – most zombie movies aren't very SORCERER-like, but this one is surprising. Among all the eyeball-eating and whatnot, pay attention to the duelling values of the two characters who consider themselves, individually, to be the hero of the story.

Live Flesh – simply amazing, my perfect pick for a SORCERER story, or rather, for what it's about when you recognize that the game's demon-stuff is pure metaphor.

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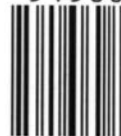
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ISBN 0-9709176-3-5



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