Jaws of the Six Serpents

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Jaws of the Six Serpents

Silver Branch Games

Written and designed by Tim Gray

The **Prose Descriptive Qualities (PDQ) System** has been designed for evocative simplicity, speed, and flexibility in play. The **PDQ System** is used under license from Chad Underkoffler; the following materials are not necessarily endorsed in any way by Chad Underkoffler, nor is he in any way responsible for the content of these materials unless specifically credited.

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INTRODUCTION

This is an old world. Civilisations have risen and fallen; and most likely will again. Now hunting beasts prowl the ruins of their cities and monuments, and tribes take refuge in their shadows. They fell by cataclysm and senility, and today we know little enough of their ways and lore. But the peoples we know began as their scions or servants, and those that are different were made so by the ancients' arts to suit their purposes. Some say it was they who set the Urges on their current course of conflict and destruction, whether by plan or sin or mishap. It is an axe-age, a sword-age, a storm-age... where the strong prey upon the weak and death can come suddenly.

"Roleplaying game"?

A roleplaying game (*RPG*) is a leisure activity for a group of people. These *players* sit around pretending to be imaginary *characters* having adventures in a fictional setting. Each controls a player character (*PC*), except one who takes the role of Game Master (*GM*), setting up situations for the PCs and controlling the other characters they meet (non-player characters, *NPCs*). The players say what their characters do and the GM tells them what happens next; they use the rules to decide whether actions succeed or fail. The *story* progresses through *scenes* of actions at particular locations. You'll need pencils and paper and about three six-sided *dice* each.

Days of high adventure

Jaws of the Six Serpents is a self-contained fantasy roleplaying game that aims toward the sword-and-sorcery or pulp fantasy side of the genre. It is a simpler, more direct - one might say more *macho* - world than those of many popular fantasy RPGs. Characters take on adversity for reasons that are usually personal rather than in any grand cause, and triumph through a strong sword arm and quick wits. It's not a world where marketplaces throng with dozens of intelligent species, or where enchanted items can be found under every rock.

Magic is present, well known and powerful, but the sorcerers who practise it are few and often regarded with fear and hostility for the danger they present. Large "civilised" settlements are few and far between, and harsh environments are themselves challenging opponents for characters. "Monsters" are usually other people; fierce beasts, often larger and more aggressive than their counterparts in our own world; or unnatural things that claw their way in from realms beyond or are created by sorcery.

Jaws also aims to support darker fantasy - worlds with low technology, some magic, supernatural creatures and - crucially - characters who are up against it, with death a constant companion. These tales tend to have a pragmatic and unflattering view of human nature, shared by most of the characters in the setting, and main characters wrestle with whether they can or should rise above this.

This book

Jaws has three parts.

- A rules toolkit, settingout the core PDQ system and customising it for pulpier and/or darker fantasy games.

- A setting outline you can use for such games (with plenty of material you can swipe for settings of your own).

- A GM's section with notes for customising the game to suit the setting of your choice, and general notes to aid in play.

Who they are and what they do

Certainly in the pulpier fantasy, characters are very capable. Most are warriors, thieves or both - but even those departing from this pattern should be able to handle themselves in a fight against rank-and-file opponents. They are driven primarily by their own self-interest, and if they accomplish something in a greater cause that's largely incidental. On the darker fantasy side, some characters might start off more vulnerable and focus on their emotional journey; and grappling with the worthiness of a cause versus one's self-interest is a well-used theme.

As to what they do... the desire for wealth, power or whatever can lead them to theft and intrigue in the cities, or to explore the ruins left by ancient empires. A lot of stories are basically incidental, fitting in the loose mould of, "While you're trying to do this, that happens" - like wandering into a town and getting embroiled in a coup or uprising, or entering a supposedly deserted tomb and finding monstrosities that must not be released upon the world. Other stories might follow more of a quest or vision route, where the characters have some burning aim to fulfil and events are stages on the way to achieving that, like a war against a mighty foe (winning it, or just coming out in one piece). Opponents can be political factions, the thieves' guild, local oppressors, things from the outer Dark or rival characters pursuing the same (or contrary) goals.
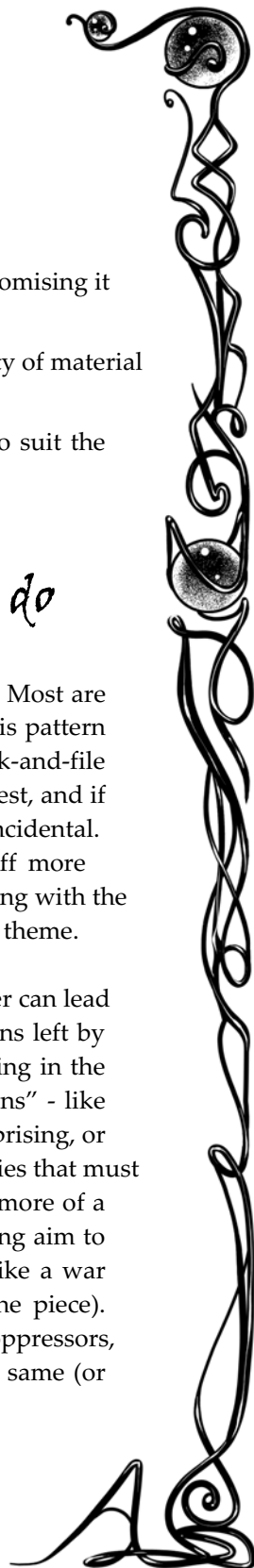
The world of the Six Serpents

The world is not what it was; and perhaps not what it will be in ages to come. Civilised folk gather in a small number of towns and cities, and some of these are great, but the wilderness around is greater.

On the western coast the city of Sartain looks out over the waters of the Westmare, toiling and scheming. The forests of the southern promontory hide ruined cities and dangerous beasts. Beyond, the city of Nilsomar on the Sea of the Moon hides behind masks and a sweet-smelling haze. To the east, the mountains block off such lands as might lie beyond. From there the Blackworm River runs all the way to the west. Elsewhere in the interior, travellers in the round desert of the Empty Cup tread the dust of elder civilisations beneath their feet.

Everyone knows that the world is shaped by six forces or energies known as the Urges: Fire, Metal, Wood, Earth, Wind and Water. They are depicted as a hexagon formed by serpents, each biting the tail of the next in a cycle of domination or destruction (Wind conquers Water, Water conquers Fire, Fire conquers Metal, and so on). The harshness and instability of the land is due to conflicts between these forces. Some legends say they are actually great dragons, possibly the original creators of the world and now entombed within it. There is much symbolism relating the Urges to physical, mental and social phenomena. This is the extent of the common folk's knowledge: they leave the debate of such things to the sages and get on with the business of daily life.

People speak fearfully of the Dark Below, generally visualised as a black void below the wheel of the Urges, home to various unhuman and hostile entities. Sometimes these beings are summoned by corrupt sorcerers, or find their own way to the world, where they seek to dominate and corrupt or to feed on lives and souls. Scholars recognise a "Dark Urge" energy connected to this Realm and its inhabitants. Some people - notably the priestly order of Intercessors - also talk about the Light Above, a realm where the spirits of the Worthy Dead go and from whence these good spirits may sometimes send aid to the living.

PDQ Core Rules

QuALITIES

The **Prose Descriptive Qualities** *(PDQ) System* has been designed for evocative simplicity, speed, and flexibility in play. It has three levels of resolution, suitable for any type of situation.

The core element of PDQ is the concept of a prose, descriptive, do-it-yourself, wide-ranging **Quality** standing in as attribute, advantage, merit, flaw, skill, or incapability. They're rated on a simple scale of **Ranks**, and the rules provide tools for comparing these when characters compete against each other or their surroundings.

When you make a character you'll be able to buy a certain number of Ranks to split between Qualities as you wish. Whatever is important about a character is written down as a Quality; they should grow out of the character concept and game setting. This gives you great freedom to create the character you want.

Qualities are often drawn from five general areas.

- **Physical**. Having to do with the body, athleticism, or natural talents. *Examples:* Strong, Agile, Hardy, Climbing, Knife-fighting, Roguishly Handsome, Dancing, Perseverance.

- **Mental**. Areas of study, intellectual acuity, education. *Examples:* Quick-witted, Strong-willed, Observation, Knowledge of the Supernatural, Medicine, Craft Metal, Fine Food and Drink.

- **Social**. Groups the character is a member of or associates with, skills in dealing with people. *Examples:* Persuasion, Trickery, Intimidation, Alluring, Silversmiths' Guild, Conversationalist, Order of the Star.

- **Professional**. Knowledge and skills picked up on the job. *Examples:* Warrior, Thief, Street Urchin, Spy, Scholar, Bounty Hunter.

- **Other**. Esoteric skills, magical powers or physical resources.

Penumbra

Qualities represent a broad skill or field of knowledge: if a particular Quality is relevant at all to an action or topic, the character may apply that Quality when attempting that action or understanding that topic. This is called the **penumbra** (or "shadow") of the Quality. Therefore, a player shouldn't choose Qualities that are too narrow or its penumbra will cast too narrow a shadow; too broad, and identifying the sorts of things that should fall under the penumbra becomes pointless. The parameters for what's "too broad" or "too narrow" are up to the individual GM.

Remember to make sure you and the GM have the same understanding of the abilities you choose. Write a sentence or two of description for ones that are ambiguous.

For example, the Quality "Swordsmanship" would be useful not just in hacking away at things, but also in cleaning and maintaining swords, discovering the location of nearby swordsmiths and fencing trainers, and so forth. If the player had instead selected a Quality of "Rapier Fighting" the Quality would only be useful in fighting with that kind of sword, and involve knowledge surrounding rapiers exclusively.

Overlapping Qualities. If a situation falls under the penumbra of more than one of your Qualities, all of them can help to accomplish the task. That doesn't just cover skills, but personality traits and motivations too - for instance, in the right situation your "Loves Sister" or "Protector of Tribe" Qualities can make you a deadlier fighter.
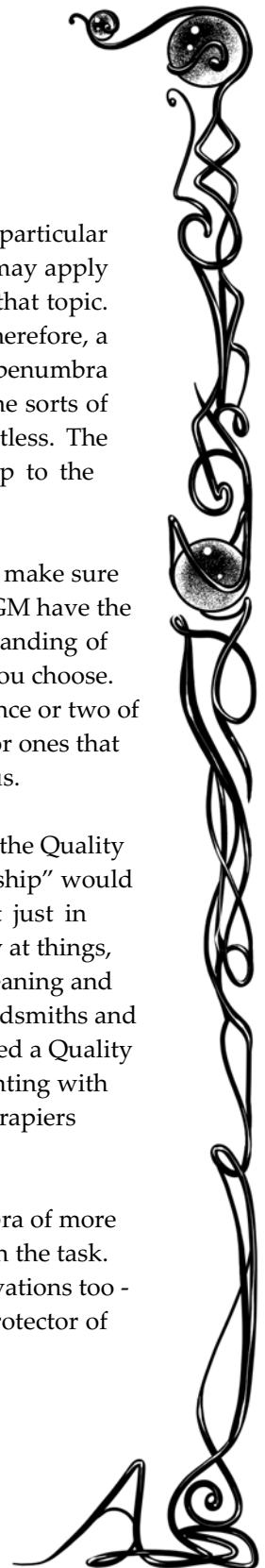
Ranks

Qualities have **Ranks**, which indicate increasing proficiency. From lowest to highest, the Ranks are:

- **Poor [-2]**
- **Average [0]**
- **Good [+2]**
- **Expert [+4]**
- **Master [+6]**

The numbers in square brackets following the Rank of the Quality show the Rank's **Modifier** (MOD) – how much is added to or subtracted from a 2d6 dice roll (see *Task Resolution*). Characters have some things going for them (Strengths), and at least one thing working against them (Weakness). At everything else, characters are neither noteworthy nor inept – they have countless unspecified, invisible Average [0] Qualities. At character creation, buying the first Rank of a Quality lets you write it down at Good - you've effectively raised one of your invisible Qualities one Rank.

See the **PDQ Master Table** on the next page for the Ranks and Modifiers set out in more detail. You'll notice that the same Ranks are used to set difficulty for a task, and then they're represented by a **Target Number** (TN). The basic mechanic is to roll two six-sided dice (2d6), add the results together with your Quality's MOD, and try to beat the TN - but that will be explained more fully after we've covered Qualities.

Strengths and Weaknesses

A **Strength** is a positive aspect (benefit, skill, talent, attribute, or power) of a character. Come up with a word or a pithy phrase to sum up the Strength. Examples include Fighting, Willpower, Fly Like A Bird, Find Bargains, and Run Away!

PDQ MASTER CHART

Rank	As Quality Rank	Modifier to 2D6 roll	As Difficulty Rank	Target Number
Poor	Notably inept.	-2	A trivial task.	5
Average	Typical human capability.	0	Straightforward task.	7
Good	Better than usual; most professionals or talented newcomers.	+2	Complex task, requiring attention to detail.	9
Expert	Noted/famed professional; talent with skill to back it up.	+4	Intricate task, difficult and requiring sharp concentration, hard for an average person.	11
Master	Acclaimed genius: talent with substantial skill behind it.	+6	Extremely difficult task, hard for most professionals.	13

A **Weakness** is a negative aspect of the character, stemming from ignorance, flawed understanding, physical or mental incapability, or some other vulnerability. Pick something that will be fun or entertaining for you the player. Come up with a word or a pithy phrase to sum up the Weakness. Examples here include Glass Jaw, Weak-willed, Slow As Molasses, and Shy. Weaknesses are always Poor [-2] Rank.

Depending upon the character concept, *any* Quality can be a Strength or a Weakness. For example, suppose a character has "Hook-Handed" as a Quality. If it's ranked Average [0] or above, it's a Strength: the character can use his hook as a weapon (in physical conflicts) or as a threat (in social conflicts) – or even more inventive things like picking a lock or sliding down a rope – with an increased chance of success. But if the character has "Poor [-2] Hook-Handed", this is a Weakness: the character keeps getting his hook stuck into things, forgets about it when he tries to scratch his head, has problems holding on to things that require two hands, and so forth. It's all in the way you spin it. It's even possible to have the same Quality as a Strength *and* a Weakness, helping or hindering in different circumstances.

Notes on choosing Qualities

Broad vs deep. When buying ranks of Qualities players can choose between having more Qualities at a lower level of competency or having fewer Qualities at a higher level of competency. If you throw everything into one area of expertise you'll really shine when that type of action comes up, but you'll be unimpressive for other things. You should also note that because of the way the system works (explained later), such prodigies are slightly less durable than their companions who are merely competent but more rounded. Shine bright, burn out.

Overlapping Qualities fill a similar role to "feats", "edges" or whatever in other RPGs: they let you boost your effectiveness at specific types of task by picking Qualities that work in tandem, at the expense of broader expertise and flexibility as you use up precious Quality slots. For example you could take both Warrior and Swordsmanship to combine when

fighting with a blade, but with all that training you probably didn't get out much.

Tweaking choices. Never fear: if, after play begins, a particular Quality sees no use and doesn't really add to the characterisation of a PC, a player should feel free to change it to something that fits better – but only after talking to the GM.

Gear

The baseline position for PDQ is that characters are assumed to have the equipment needed to perform the skills reflected in their Qualities, but this makes no difference to how effective they are. For instance, different weapon types don't, in themselves, make any difference to the damage you do in combat - having a sword just enables you to use your Sword Fighting Quality. The system defaults to focusing on the characters, not the equipment list.

However, you can assign Qualities to objects, making them important to the story. The simplest is just the general quality (small Q) of the thing, reflecting materials, workmanship, role in the grand tapestry of fate and the like – e.g. Good [+2] Ancestral Sword. This comes into play when the item performs its key function(s), adding on to any other Qualities that apply. Stuff that's unusual, rare or expensive in the setting needs to be taken as a Quality. In fact, any item that you want to give you a bonus for rolls needs to be specified. Gear is covered more fully later on.

Character items. These are objects that have been bought using the available Quality Ranks during character creation. They are effectively part of the character. Having invested in such an item, the player should not be permanently deprived of it - though the character might lose the use of it temporarily if it's lost, stolen or in need of repair (and will be compensated by a Fortune Point - see later - for each scene they're without it).
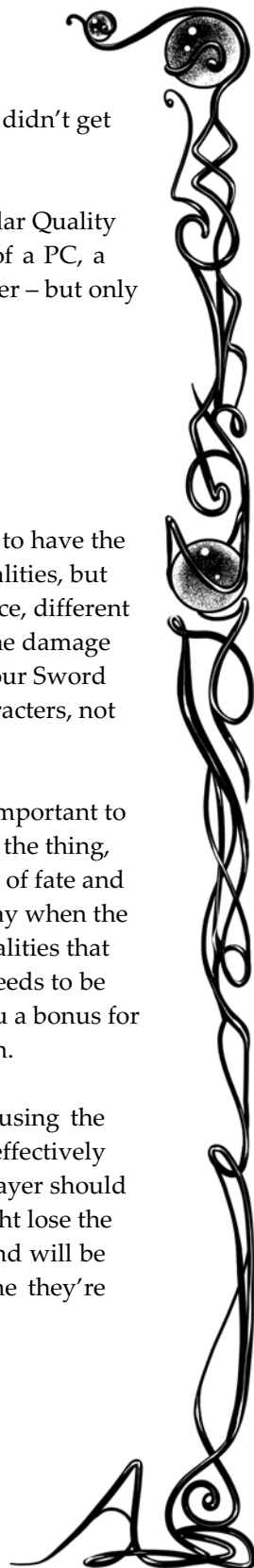
Props. These are objects that are not part of the character, but are available for character use for a while, like a Good [+2] Bag of Coins. You don't start with any: they're gained and lost in play.

Living beings as gear. This is certainly possible: you can have an Expert [+4] Warhorse or a Good [+2] Squire as character Qualities, for instance, and maybe even as Props.

Powers

These are supernatural and magical things beyond what ordinary people can do. They're usually restricted to characters with particular sorts of background (like trained sorcerers) and supernatural creatures. They can also be attached to objects. *Examples:* Breathe Fire*, Move Objects*, Summon Insect Swarm*, Astonishing Leap*, Create Undead*, Holy Smiting*, Discerning Glance*. Powers for this game are explained in detail later on.

Notation. When listed, Powers are marked with an asterisk*; it's wise to do this on the character sheet too, as sometimes it's important to know whether something's magical.

Active Powers. When you put the first Rank into a Power that lets you do something special like hurling lightning or changing shape you get it at Average [0], not Good [+2]: the benefit is gaining the ability to do it at all. (You'll see later that this also means characters specialising in Powers are slightly less able to soak up damage. It's a trade-off for being able to do fancy stuff in the story.)

Enhancements. Sometimes a Power enhances an existing capability, like improving one's sense of smell or making a bow more accurate. The first Rank buys Good as normal, providing a MOD.

TASK RESOLUTION BASICS

When your character tries to do something, the GM will determine if the situation is *simple*, *complicated*, or *conflict*. Let's take each in turn.

Simple Situations

These are applied when the task is clear-cut, there are no outstanding issues interfering with the attempted action, or randomness would bog down the game. The GM looks at the PDQ Master Chart and determines the Difficulty Rank of the task, then compares that to the character's most appropriate Quality Rank. If the character's Rank is higher they simply succeed in the task, with no dice roll required. Otherwise the task becomes a *complicated situation*.

> *Example:* Janos wants to climb a Good [TN 9] cliff using his Expert [+4] Outdoorsman Quality. Because his Rank is higher, he simply succeeds.

Sometimes the GM might not allow a situation to be treated as simple and require a roll from everybody, for instance to inject some tension.

Complicated Situations

These involve a single dice roll to determine success or failure. Use them when a character's Quality isn't high enough to make the task routine, or when the story calls for a tension between success and failure.

To attempt a complicated situation roll two regular six-sided dice (2d6), add the two results together and add on the Modifier for your Quality Rank (zero if you don't have any relevant Qualities). To succeed, your total must equal or beat the Target Number of the task's Difficulty Rank.
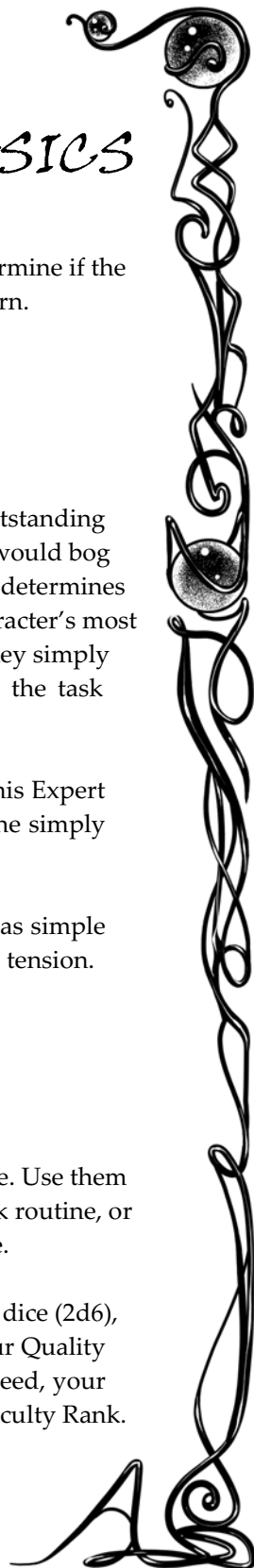
The TN might come from the GM's assessment of abstract difficulty for a task, or it might come from an opposing character's Quality Rank.

> *Example:* Following Janos up the Good [TN 9] cliff is Katryn, who only has Good [+2] Agile to help her. As that's equal to the difficulty she must roll for it. With her Quality that's 2d6 + 2, aiming for a total of at least 9. She rolls a 3 and a 5, giving a total of 10, and scrambles nimbly to the top.

You can use complicated situations when characters are opposed by minor non-player characters and you don't want to play through the exchange in detail - just resolve it with a single roll.

Conflict Situations

These involve active resistance from another character: trying to punch a guy in the face, out-thinking a chess player or running a race. Conflict situations include more than just the immediate success or failure of an attempted action. Conflict includes the back and forth of an active contest, out-manoeuvring the competition and wearing down an opponent's resistance. Examples of conflict situations include combat, seduction, haggling and debating - the same rules apply in each case.

(Some gaming groups might not want to use the conflict situation mechanics to resolve social interactions, and will want to rely on pure roleplaying instead. This is fine – the rules structure is there if a group wishes to use it.)

Conflict situations progress through a series of exchanges where characters compare the results of 2d6 plus Modifier rolls; the higher successful result wins and does "damage" to the loser. PDQ uses an abstract form of damage that reflects reducing ability to influence the course of the story rather than simulating cuts, bruises and other forms of harm. The conflict goes back and forth, with opponents wearing each other down until one of them is out of the contest. There are more detailed rules for this in a couple of pages.

Upshifts and Downshifts

Sometimes the Rank of a Quality gets modified by circumstances or special abilities before determining the result of a situation.

Upshifts

These cause a roll to be made as if the Quality were one Rank higher, essentially giving an additional +2 to the roll.

If a player describes an attempt to perform an action in a particularly flavourful and entertaining way the GM can give an upshift for that action. So, rather than "I hit the sailor", the player says something like "I grab the sailor's shirt with one hand and pull him closer to punch him in the face with my other fist!". If the PC had a Good [+2] Pirate Quality this would change the roll from 2d6+2 to 2d6+4, as if he were Expert [+4].

Upshifts above Master Rank add *an extra die* to the character's roll - so instead of 2d6+6+2 you roll 3d6+6. A further upshift would be 4d6+6, and so on. Once you get to these dizzy heights, results *should* be impressive.

Downshifts

These cause a roll to be made as if the Quality were one Rank lower, essentially giving -2 to the roll. (While functionally the same thing as a Weakness, the reasons behind them are different.)

Downshifts can work well to reflect changes in the complexity of a situation, but GMs should try not to overuse them as situational modifiers. Games tend to run more smoothly if you just set the Difficulty Rank of a task appropriately. For example, if the PCs are climbing a Good [TN 9] cliff and it starts to rain, a downshift makes sense - but if it's already raining when they begin, make it Expert [TN 11] from the start.

Downshifts below Poor Rank mean *automatic failure* in that task.
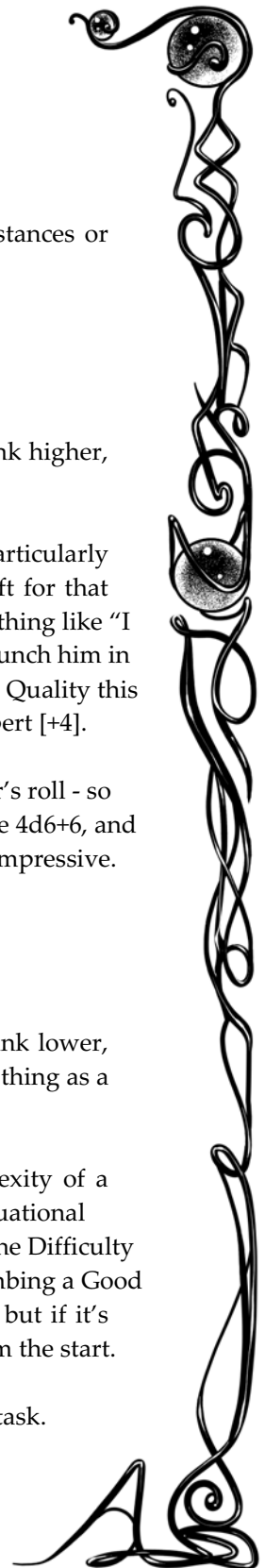
CONFLICT RULES

Initiative

Conflicts proceed as a series of **Turns**, during which every character has chance to take an action and react to the actions of others.

Within each Turn, figure out who goes first – that is, who has **Initiative**. It follows a number of broad brackets, in the following order. (The order might adjust after the first Turn, but then usually stays the same.)

- It may depend on the situation. If a character attacks without warning – taking the victim by surprise – the attacker automatically goes first. (Some sort of stealth vs perception check is often used to see whether the target is surprised. If the target is caught totally unawares defence can only include passive Qualities, e.g. Tough as Nails but not Fancy Footwork.) In many cases the initiator of a conflict goes first even without surprise, for the first Turn at least.

- Characters with a "speed" or "reaction time" Quality relevant to the situation (Fastest Sword in the East, Jumpy, Quick Wits) act in order of their Ranks.

- Characters with no special speed act.

- If any characters happen to be unusually slow, they act last of all.

Within each of these brackets the GM can count down from Master to Poor if necessary. Player characters go before non-player characters. If you need to break a tie, each party rolls one die and the highest number wins Initiative. Characters with a higher Initiative may "hold their actions" for as long as they want, in order to react to what happens, but after the last character has done something they need to take that held action or lose it.

After everyone involved has taken an action (or chosen not to), the characters can start a new Turn. This continues till the conflict is resolved.

Moment of Truth

The character whose turn it is will be called the *attacker*; the character who is the target of the attacker's action is called the *defender*. The attacker's player explains what the attempted action is, and the defender explains how they'll try to counter that action. Then both of them roll 2d6 and add the appropriate Modifier(s). PDQ looks at the overall "goodness" of attack and defence in one go: accuracy, power, evasion, resistance to harm and whatever other factors might be in there. Throw all the MODs in together.

If the attacker gets a higher total, *damage* is applied to the defender; if the defender's result is higher, no damage is done. A tie is just that – nobody wins, nobody loses - but they are both slightly fatigued or discomforted.

Damage

Damage (be it physical, mental, emotional, or social) is the loss of capability. As a character takes damage, they are less likely to be able to perform at peak efficiency. This is shown by a number of **damage Ranks**, effectively downshifts to the character's listed abilities that last at least the length of the current conflict. If damage wipes out all of a character's Quality Ranks they "**zero out**" and lose the conflict, with whatever consequences might follow.

Failure and Damage Ranks

There are actually two types of damage: Failure Ranks and Damage Ranks, caused by different kinds of harm. A character can suffer both types in the course of a conflict situation. They are functionally the same thing during a conflict, but Failure is recovered quickly and Damage can trouble the character for longer.
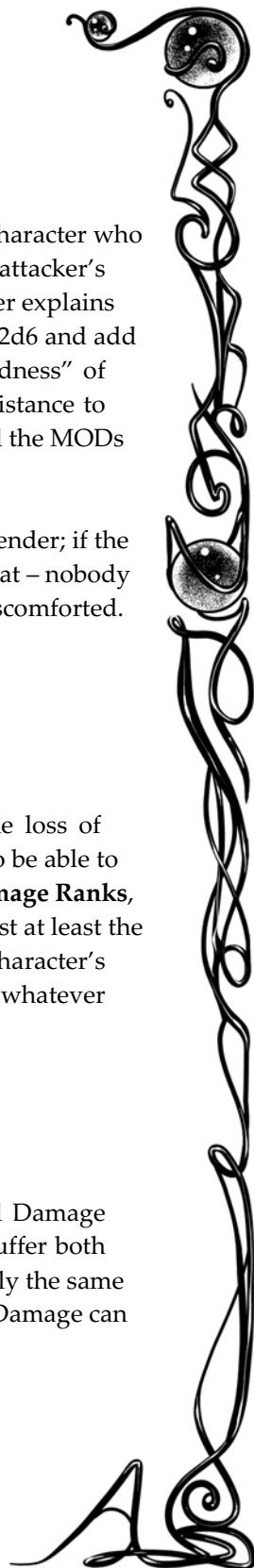
In mental, social, and some physical conflicts, loss of capability is usually temporary and is represented by **Failure Ranks**. Examples include a chess match, witty repartee, or running a race. Failure Ranks are almost always completely recovered at the end of a scene (and might be easier to recover within a scene).

In many physical conflicts loss of capability is more enduring and is represented by **Damage Ranks**, which can persist over several scenes. Examples here include not just combat with weapons, but also environmental damage taken by running through fire, falling off a roof, or starting to drown. (Non-physical conflicts might sometimes produce Damage Ranks for persistent effects, like a serious social setback.)

Applying damage

In a successful attack, the difference between the attacking and defending totals determines how many Failure or Damage Ranks are done to the defender. If the roll results are tied, *both* characters take a single Failure Rank.

Each point of damage reduces one Quality by one Rank: it will function at that lower Rank until the character recovers from the damage. The character's player selects which Qualities takes the damage, and can spread the damage out across several abilities at once. (It may only be applied to abilities listed on the character sheet, not to "default" Average Qualities.)

> *Example:* Kortak has got into a bar fight with a local thug. He has Expert [+4] Brawling, and the thug also has Brawling, but at Good [+2]. Kortak, being a player character, gets his swing in first and rolls 2d6+4 for a result of 10. The thug's defence is 2d6+2 for a result of 8. The difference is 2, so the thug takes 2 Failure Ranks (as it's unarmed combat). If he allocates those to his Brawling Quality they'll take it down from Good to Average to Poor.

Whichever Quality is allocated the first hit of damage in a conflict generates a **Story Hook**, a complication for the character's life (see below).

Zeroing out

Characters eventually hit bottom in one of their Qualities and "zero out". When all Qualities are reduced to Poor and there are more damage Ranks to allocate, one Quality gets dropped to a "zeroed" level below Poor (any further damage is unimportant) and the character cannot continue the conflict. This means they lose the conflict they're in, or are at least uninvolved with the rest of the scene.

Zeroing out like this could mean the character has totally flubbed the seduction attempt, been knocked unconscious in combat, or run out of test-taking time and must put down his quill. If possible, the player describes how and why the PC is out of the scene; if unable or unwilling, the GM can depict the loss of the conflict. If the Scene continues after the character falls, for instance if there are other heroes yet fighting on, the GM lets the player know if/when they can return to the Scene (see below, *Recovering from Damage*).

Consequences. Just because a character zeroes out in a physical conflict doesn't mean they die. However, it does mean that they are unconscious or otherwise helpless, and at the mercy of an opponent. Sometimes zeroing out is just the prelude to a character being shoved into a villain's deathtrap! In situations other than physical battle an opponent might inflict other kinds of harm on a helpless foe, like destroying their reputation.

Environmental damage

This comes from stuff like falling, jumping through a fire, drowning, or other complicated situations. The damage is assigned a Rank and the character attempts to resist its TN with a suitable roll. If they succeed they're unharmed; if they fail, the difference between roll and Target Number is the number of Damage Ranks taken. A hazard might take effect just once, or repeat at intervals - e.g. a poison or disease might have to be resisted once per day until a week passes, the character resists three times, or some such.
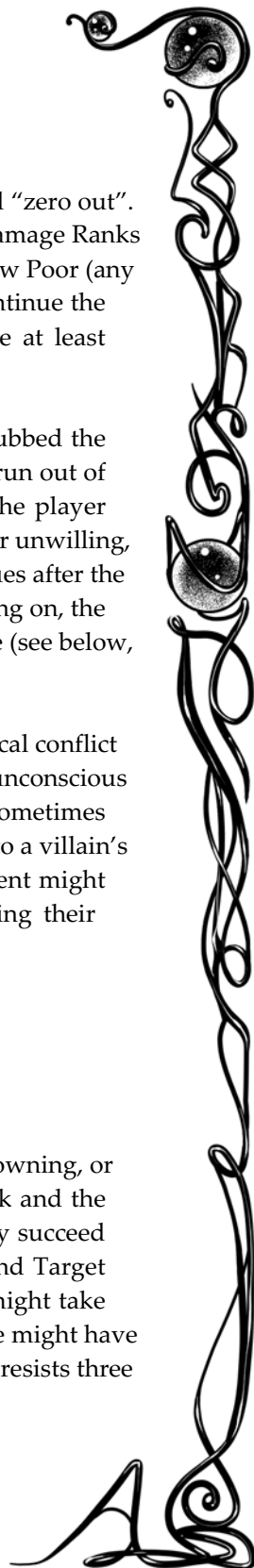
Recovering from damage

At the end of a scene damaged characters begin to recover lost Ranks. How many they get back depends upon whether they are still in the middle of a dangerous situation or have completed that bit of the story.

- **Momentary Danger**. If nothing else is going on, and the character is otherwise safe, relaxed, and lacking any time constraints, *all* Failure and Damage Ranks are removed, restoring Qualities to their normal levels. In other words, the scene just gone was pretty much self-contained as a part of the story. *Examples:* a random bar-fight, a chase on horseback, a seduction attempt.

- **Continuing Danger**. If the scene just gone was part of an overarching situation that is risky, stressful, or under deadline, characters recover all lost Failure Ranks but only 1d6 lost Damage Ranks. The player chooses which Qualities' Ranks are restored (and will probably pick those they think they're about to need most). The character will not recover any more Ranks until the next scene ends or some other factor comes into play (like supernatural healing). *Examples:* a difficult journey to get an injured person to a doctor, chasing down a monster, assaulting a villain's secret headquarters.

Judging which of the two applies can sometimes be tricky. If in doubt, allow automatic full recovery only at the end of a story (or perhaps story segment), or on reaching a place that's specifically designated as safe.

Special damage recovery

Intrinsic Qualities. In Continuing Danger, a Strength like Quick Healer should allow the character to gain back the standard 1d6 Damage Ranks plus its Modifier between scenes. A Weakness like Poor [-2] Slow Healer would mean that the character rolls 1d6-2 (minimum of zero Ranks back).

Mundane aid. Another character can use appropriate Qualities to help. Because the system is so flexible the GM can allow anything that sounds right for the situation, like Healer to address wounds or disease, or Oratory to restore flagging spirits, or an item like a Good [+2] Herbal

Salve. So these come into play at different times, e.g. if the situation is a tense negotiation with no physical injuries Healer wouldn't be any good.

- **Emergency aid** - the GM might sometimes allow things like First Aid and Oratory to help mid-scene in appropriate situations, healing up to MOD Failure Ranks but *not* Damage Ranks.

- **Thorough aid** - this takes at least several minutes, and perhaps equipment and facilities. It adds MOD to the number of Damage Ranks the helped character recovers between scenes.

Supernatural aid. Spells or items with suitable powers work the same as mundane aid, with the benefit that they take effect instantly (so potentially within a scene as well as at its end). Their use might have some sort of cost, or there might be a limit on how often they can be used.

Understanding PDQ damage

What it simulates. Just this: declining power to affect the direction and outcome of the action. It's abstract. There's no requirement for the allocation of damage to Qualities to "make sense". So if you're wondering why getting stabbed with a knife damages your relationship with your clan, don't worry about it. That said, if you *want* to come up with justifications to add a bit of colour you're entirely free to do so. ("My clan uses ritual knife-fights to settle disputes, so getting beaten means I lose face.")

Applying it. In any conflict Qualities can be thought of as useful for either "attack", "defence" or "absorption." Say your character has Good [+2] Rank in the Qualities of Brawling, Debating and Scribe. In combat (a physical conflict) you will probably opt to keep Brawling at Good [+2] and apply Damage Ranks to Debating and Scribe. In an argument (a social conflict), you will want to keep Debating high for as long as possible, and take Failure Ranks on Brawling and Scribe first. If being audited by the King's Revenue Service (could be a mental, social or professional conflict, depending on how the GM spins the situation), you would protect Scribe, try to keep Debating at Good [+2] as long as you could, and sacrifice Brawling.
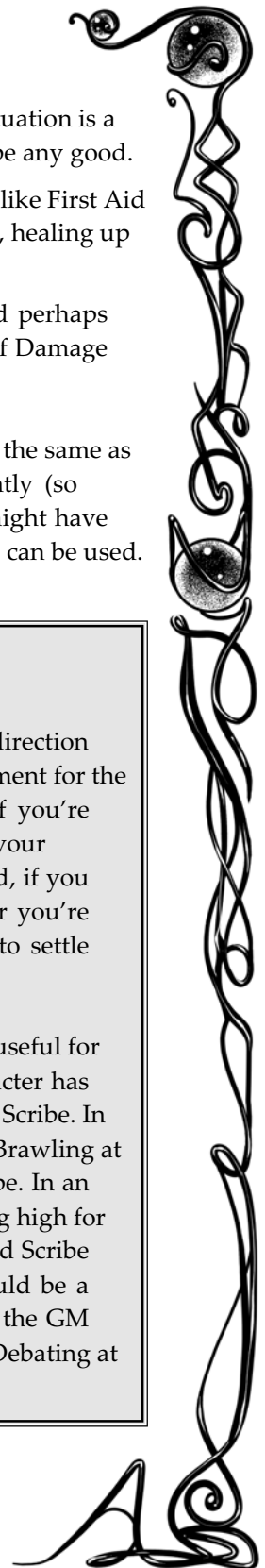
STORY HOOKS

This feature of PDQ helps the players and GM come up with exciting or interesting subplots, complications, and events for their characters. They might manifest straight away, but the GM will usually store them up for after the current scene.

In conflict situations, whichever Quality the player selects to take the first hit of damage generates a Story Hook. Some GMs might also wish to use the ability that the PC chooses when zeroing out of a conflict (that is, when any one of the character's Qualities drops below Poor [-2] Rank) as a source of Story Hooks.

Examples:

- "A young swashbuckler challenges you to a duel!" (Swordsman, Famous);

- "A message arrives from your old teacher - he needs your help urgently!" (Organisation, Relationship with Teacher);

- "Armed men step out of the shadows - the woman has led you into a trap!" (Amorous, Enemy of the Order of the Star).

Story Hooks are normally a cue for future events, but you can use them to trigger a flashback to past events instead. This can be useful when there are only one or two players, or if your game's story has only just got started. This inserted scene is played out with the GM and players temporarily taking over any involved NPCs. These characters interact until they hit a suitable point like a crisis of some kind, then the action returns to the original conflict.

NOTES AND OPTIONS

Overlapping and stacking

Characters can certainly have Qualities with overlapping penumbras, like Warrior and Axe Fighting. If a situation matches both, then both contribute to rolls. In fact, this is a very simple way to model specific areas of a skill or talent where the character performs particularly well. The downside, of course, is that fewer Ranks are available to buy other Qualities to round out the character.

All Upshifts and Downshifts on a given Quality are cumulative, possibly cancelling each other out or - if you Upshift beyond Master - giving extra dice. When combining *different* Qualities you could technically work out the Ranks and possible extra dice (e.g. adding a Good [+2] is effectively the same as an Upshift), but it's less fiddly to just add all the MODs together rather than working out how many extra dice to use. As a rule of thumb, apply Shifts to the primary Quality you're using and add the MODs for any secondary, assisting Qualities - so you could end up with rolls like 3d6+10!

Characters working together

If multiple characters team up to perform a task, they can all chip in MODs from relevant Qualities. Only one of them actually makes the roll (usually the character with the higher Initiative).

> *Example:* Zandra (Expert [+4] Merchant) and Birtol (Good [+2] Minstrel) decide to work together to try to convince an Expert [+4] Theatre Owner that Birtol is worth signing up as part of the entertainment. Zandra will make the roll of 2d6+4+2; she gets a 4 and a 6, for a total of 16 against the owner's TN of 11, and he's sold.
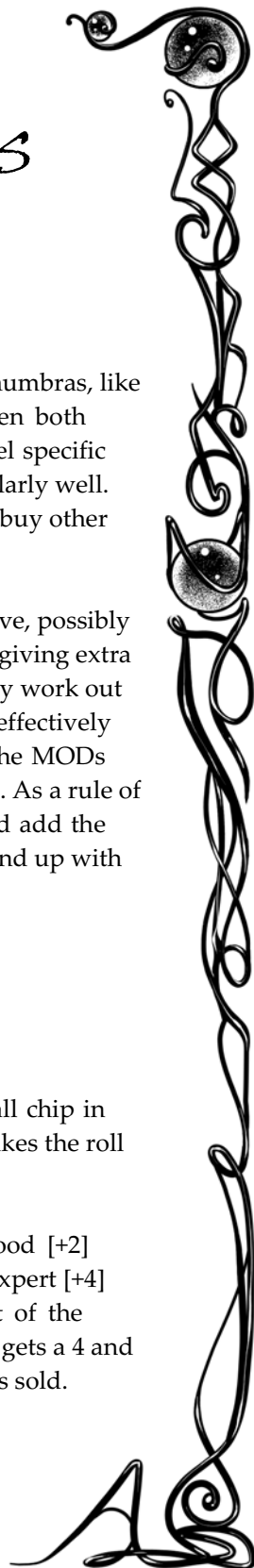
Multiple targets

If you want to take on multiple targets in a single action you can split your attentions between them, but spreading yourself thin like this makes you less effective. For each additional target selected, apply a Downshift to the Quality Rank. Once you reach Poor you can't split any further.

You never need to split your defence this way, even if you face multiple attackers: you get the full thing each time you're attacked.

> *Example:* Kortak (Expert [+4] Brawling) is fighting two eerily silent black-garbed assassins. If he tries to take them both out with powerful blows he'll only be at an effective Rank of Good [+2] for his attacks on each.

Time Range and Movement

Time in Conflict

Scenes are an entire bit of action in a given location at a given time, often coinciding with working through a particular conflict.

Each character takes a **turn** or **action**: that's when they make their move, say their piece, throw a punch, etc. (If Turn is capitalized, it generally means the set of all characters' next actions and reactions.)

Other characters **react** during a character's turn – saying something back or performing a defence, usually – but their reactions can only be in response to the actions of the character whose turn it currently is. They cannot initiate actions until their turn.
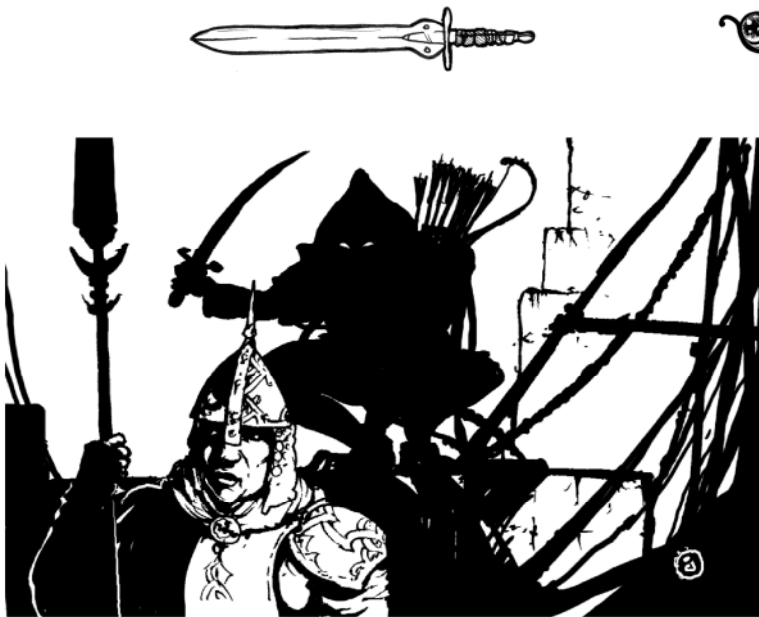
Range in Conflict

In general, GMs can be really flexible with distance. Ranges are either **Near** (can punch it), **Middling** (can run up and punch it), **Far** (can throw or shoot at it), or **Too Far** (out of range). If one really wants to connect numbers to this, Near would be any distance up to a yard, Middling would be between 1 and 3 yards, Far would be between 3 and 60 yards, and Too Far is anything over 60 yards.

Movement in Conflict

PDQ tends to leave movement rates for characters abstract and up to the discretion of the GM (like requiring a character to make a roll using a speed or movement Quality vs. a reasonable Difficulty Rank).

If you want a concrete rate, characters can move 4 yards plus the sum of all involved Quality Modifiers per turn.

Poor Qualities in conflicts

If a Quality is reduced to Poor by damage, you can simply choose not to include it in rolls even if it would be relevant (unless it is specifically targeted somehow, e.g. as a difficulty for someone else's action). This is different from a Weakness, which is a permanent Poor Quality for the character - these must always be figured into an applicable roll, reducing effectiveness. If applying the Weakness leads to damage that generates a Story Hook, you might wish to make it more intense than usual.

Downshift options

Sometimes you'll encounter an option to downshift a particular Quality in order to do something special. This is a way of limiting the number of times that thing can be done per scene. You do it, and then temporarily reduce the Quality one Rank. Once it reaches Poor, you can't do that thing any more. So if the Quality is Good, one use takes it to Average, then a second use takes it to Poor and it's temporarily used up. At the end of the scene these downshifts go away and it can be used again.

Although it's kind of like damage Ranks, you should record it differently as it doesn't behave quite the same as either Failure or Damage. For instance you might mark them as D, F and S (for Shift).

CONFLICT EXAMPLE

Let's get a clearer picture of how conflict works with a straightforward sword fight. Here are two characters, fully statted out. (Callum is the example character you'll see created in the next part of the book.) Some sort of cross purpose has arisen, and they draw steel.

Callum

People: Earth Tribes of Kalet

Strengths: Expert [+4] Warrior, Good [+2] Strong as a Bear, Good [+2] Agile as a Mountain Lion, Good [+2] Tougher Than "Civilised" Folk, Good [+2] Outdoorsman, Good [+2] Fiery Will, Good [+2] Seeks Renown as a Great Warrior

Weakness: Poor [-2] Hot-tempered

Kylar

People: Cliff People of Narrowhome

Strengths: Good [+2] Streetwise, Good [+2] Cunning, Good [+2] Ambitious, Good [+2] Agile, Average [0] Alchemy*, Expert [+4] Weapon Fighting, Good [+2] Assassin

Weakness: Poor [-2] Low Self-esteem

Turn 1. Initiative is straightforward. Neither has a Quality relating to reaction speed, so they roll a die each and Kylar goes first.

Kylar attacks. Weapon Fighting definitely comes into play. Assassin doesn't because there's nothing sneaky about the situation. This particular GM says that Agile won't contribute to a straightforward attack but is likely to add to defence. (A different gaming group might have a different view.) So that's a total of +4 to the attack - with a roll of 8 that totals 12. Callum's player has been looking at defensive Qualities, and goes for Warrior and Agile as a Mountain Lion, giving 2d6+4+2=13. Kylar just missed.
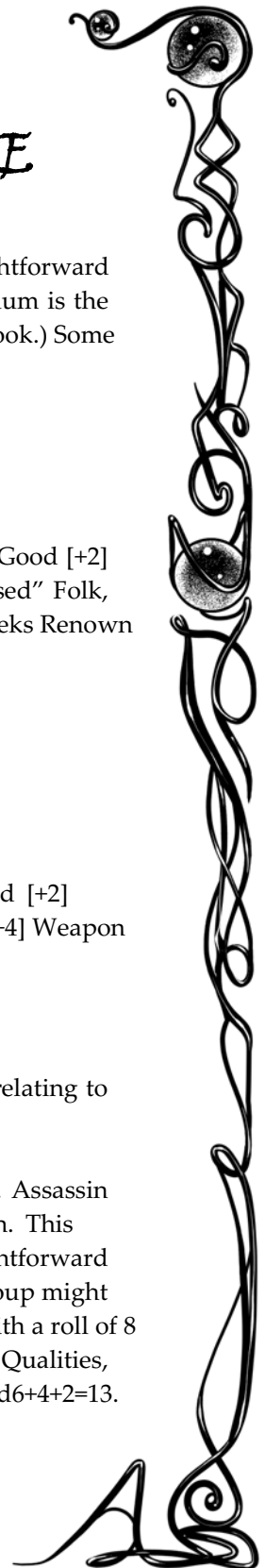
Callum attacks. Warrior [+4] and Strong as a Bear [+2], with a good roll of 10 gives 16. Kylar uses Weapon Fighting [+4] and Agile [+2] with a roll of 6 for a total of 12. Kylar takes 4 Damage Ranks. He looks at the Qualities he doesn't need right now: 1 Rank takes Alchemy* from Average to Poor, 2 Ranks on Ambitious takes that to Poor, and 1 Rank on Streetwise takes that to Average. The GM makes a note that Alchemy needs a Story Hook, as the first Quality that took damage. It would probably kick in later, but could be a broken potion bottle right now (with or without side effects).

Turn 2. They roll dice again and Callum goes first.

Callum attacks. Not messing with a winning formula, Warrior and Strong as a Bear for 2d6+6=12. Kylar's player is thinking hard about what more he can do, but only comes up with Weapon Fighting and Agile again for 2d6+6=10 - a poor roll. That's another 2 Damage Ranks. He takes Streetwise down to Poor and Assassin from Good to Average.

Kylar attacks. Inspiration strikes, and he tries a manoeuvre of pretending to react to something behind Callum to distract the northerner. This brings in Cunning [+2] on top of Weapon Fighting [+4] - with a good roll of 11 that's 17. If this was a matter of willpower Callum could add in his Fiery Will for defence, but it's more about intelligence and insight to see through the ruse and he has nothing like that. So defence is still Warrior [+4] and Agile as a Mountain Lion [+2], with a roll of just 6 for a total of 12. Callum has to take 5 Damage Ranks. That puts Outdoorsman and Seeks Renown... at Poor, and he uses the last Rank to take Tougher than "Civilised" Folk to Average. (He's not using that because it's to do with resisting hardship when being compared to soft southerners - the situation's not quite right and Kylar's not quite civilised.) Outdoorsman was the first to take a hit, so gets noted for a potential Story Hook.

Taking stock. Both characters have lost a lot of the Quality Ranks that they didn't really need in this conflict. Now it gets serious, as further damage will make them less effective in the fight. We've also seen that they're pretty evenly matched. Callum has a bit more attack power, but Kylar's better suited to coming up with clever moves to gain an advantage. It's likely to be decided on the luck of the dice and the inventiveness of the players.

Rules for Six Serpents

CHARACTER CREATION

So, ready to make a new character? Here's what you need to sort out. A **character sheet** to record your character's abilities can be downloaded from *www.silverbranch.co.uk*, though a sheet of lined paper will do fine.

Description. You'll need a name for your adventurer, and at least basic impressions they give to people who meet them for the first time. You can add much more information about their background if you like. For sword and sorcery the most important thing to bear in mind throughout is that they should be *iconic* - interesting and appealing enough that readers of their stories would come back for more. That includes evocative Quality names like 'Swift as a Serpent' instead of 'Fast'.

Required Qualities. You must take one Rank (i.e. Good) in each of these:

- Most *Jaws* games assume that all characters are human and that cultural groups have certain common traits. These **Peoples** have lists of associated Qualities. Choose your character's People and pick one Strength from the list to reflect their birthright.

- A personal **Faculty**, an innate talent like Brawn, Wits or Perception.

- A **Driver** that will motivate the character to action: a personality trait like an ambition, attachment, virtue or vice.

Open Qualities. You have 5 Ranks to allocate to whatever Qualities you wish. Buying a Quality at Good takes one Rank, Expert takes two and a Master Rank takes three. (For supernatural powers the first Rank you buy is Average.) You can add Ranks to your Required Qualities. You might want to take some of the other People Strengths. It's best to have at least one broad one like an occupation, at least one Quality that'll help in a fight and at least one kind of action you're really quite good at.

Weakness. You must also take one Quality at Poor [-2] for an area where your character has difficulties - find one that'll be interesting to play.

Make sure you have space to record **Fortune Points** and **Learning Points** - coming up shortly - and you're ready to go!

Peoples of the Six Serpents

Here are terse versions of the Quality lists for the Peoples that appear in the setting section later on. Fuller information is available there. (Weaknesses are just suggestions - you don't have to pick one of these. The Urge Qualities allow characters to boost actions associated with that Urge energy. Charms are modest single-purpose magics.)

Devilfolk of Ahaan
Strengths: Night Vision, Arcane Lore, Dark Urge, Mysterious
Weaknesses: Vulnerable to Temptation, Outsider
Other: Sorcery* available. Charms possible. Urges not Fire or Wood, and may not exceed Dark Urge Rank.

Witchfolk of Belimaur
Strengths: Intelligent, Perceptive, Secretive, Trader, Traveller
Weaknesses: Curiosity
Other: Open Quality Ranks can be spent on Charm* (specify) and Charmcraft*. Their most common Urges are Fire and Wind.

Earth Tribes of Kalet
Strengths: Wood Urge, Warrior, Oratory, Alchemy*
Weaknesses: Impulsive, Uncivilised
Other: The Urges of Earth and Fire are also relatively common.

Cliff People of Narrowhome
Strengths: Improvising, Climbing, Bargaining, Streetwise
Weaknesses: Pushy, Scruffy
Other: The most common Urges are Earth and Wind.

Masked Folk of Nilsomar
Strengths: Inscrutable, Misdirection, Trade, an art or performance skill, Alchemy*
Weaknesses: Civilised
Other: The most common Urges are Water, Fire and Wood. Sorcery and Charms are also found with average frequency.

Water People of Quegin
Strengths: Semi-aquatic*, Swimming, Boating, Water Urge
Weaknesses: Uncivilised, Vulnerable to Dehydration (from dry heat)
Other: They don't have much truck with magic. Shamans typically
have modest levels of Divination* and maybe a couple of Charms.

Freemen of the River Towns
Strengths: Steady, Practical, Craft (specify), Trader, Boating, Fisher
Weaknesses: Inflexible, Unimaginative, Civilised
Other: Earth and Metal Urges are the most common. Magic is rare,
and frowned upon; occasional "craft secret" Charms.

Citizens of Sartain
Strengths: Streetwise, Profession (specify), Connoisseur, Intrigue
Weaknesses: Civilised, Unprincipled, Vain
Other: Urges uncommon and usually limited to low Ranks, most often
Metal. A few noble bloodlines are more attuned.

Owl-men of Temisarum
Strengths: Nocturnal, Keen Senses, Stealth, Hunter, Spirit Lore
Weaknesses: Sensitive to Light
Other: The most common Urges are Water and Metal.

Special Quality types

Only introduce these if a character concept seems to require them.

Fate

Some sword and sorcery characters have a long-standing appointment
with fate: something's going to happen later in their story, for better or
for worse. Maybe they are destined to become a king, or doomed to die
by drowning. If a character seems to require it, here's how.

Making this available to generate Story Hooks is obviously important, so it needs to be a Strength. Instead of adding its MOD to rolls, allow it to be triggered up to MOD times per game *session* to give a Fortune Point for immediate use if the situation relates to the fate, e.g. if trying to depose the corrupt existing king. This gives a character whose fate is currently in play a bit of extra spotlight.

Record these in the form "Good [+2] Fate: Bring freedom to my people". Whether a character's fate can ever be fulfilled once and for all, and what happens then, is a matter for your individual game.

Fame

Giving the character a reputation is a simple use of Qualities. It affects social interactions when it comes into play, either as a Strength or a Weakness.

It's suggested that you always specify the community that the Quality covers, by occupation and/or geography, e.g. criminals, River Towns, swordsmen. It's often good to specify the nature of the reputation too, like "honoured" or "feared". So for instance "Good [+2] Enemy of the Thieves' Guild". You might want to put a ceiling on the Rank if the characters are supposed to be fairly new to their adventuring careers.

Possessions

Gear is covered in more detail under *Gear, Wealth, Trade* at the end of this section of the book. If you want a "magic item", check with the GM about the level of magic in the setting. The more sword and sorcery end of fantasy generally doesn't have these lying about. You could certainly invest a Quality in an item to reflect its workmanship or importance to the character, giving extra effectiveness when it's used and preventing it from being lost permanently - though even that's a bit unusual.
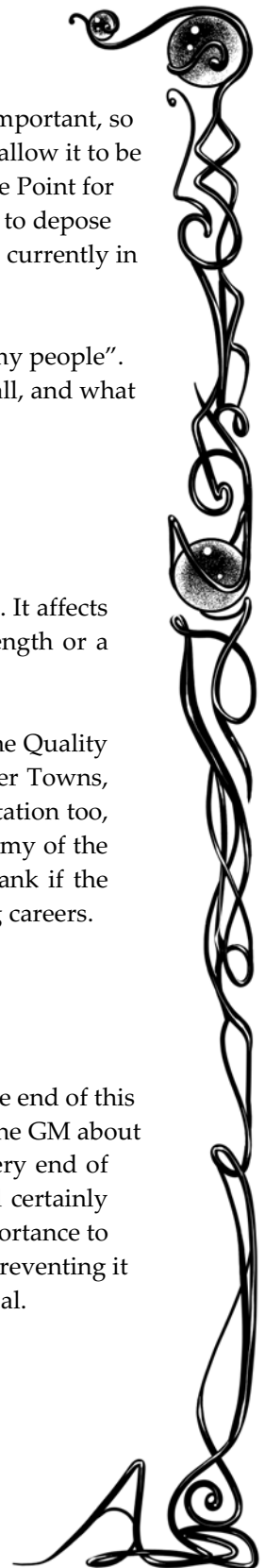
Quality inspiration lists

PDQ character creation is very open and flexible, letting you invent pretty much any Quality you like. However, that can be a bit daunting - especially if you're new to the game or the inspiration isn't flowing.

In the tables on the following pages you'll find ideas for occupations, innate talents, learned skills and personality traits. You can scan them for inspiration, and pick Qualities from there or new ones that get sparked off in your grey matter. Alternatively you can pick them randomly: roll two six-sided dice and read one as tens and the other as units.

These aren't intended to be restrictive. If you have a strong, clear character concept (and the GM approves) by all means go for it!
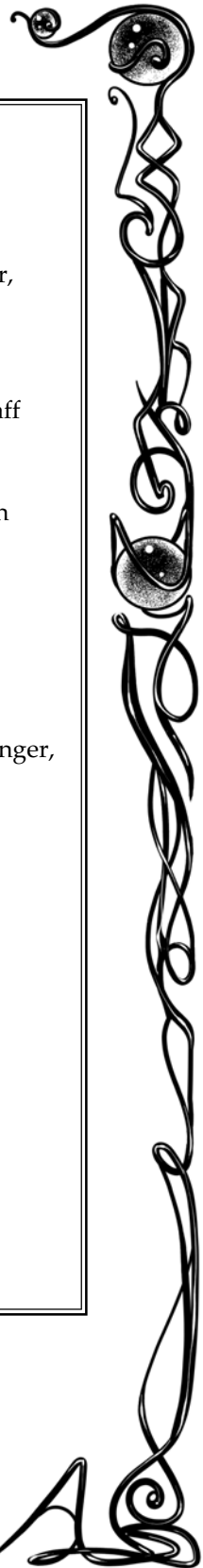
Occupation

What the character spent their time doing before they started adventuring is a key choice - lots of other things can hang on this.

11	Animal Handler
12	Beggar, Vagrant
13	Crafter - Smith, Mason, Carpenter
14	Crafter - Shoemaker, Tailor, Weaver, Dyer
15	Crafter - Baker, Brewer, Butcher, Cook
16	Crafter - Tanner, Thatcher, Cooper, Ropemaker
21	Crafter - Jeweller, Instrument Maker, Glassblower
22	Physician, Healer
23	Entertainer - Musician, Singer, Minstrel, Storyteller, Actor
24	Entertainer - Acrobat, Dancer, Juggler, Knife Thrower, Conjuror
25	Farmer
26	Fisher
31	Haulier, Wagoner, Boatman
32	Herder
33	Hunter/Guide
34	Innkeeper, Bar staff
35	Merchant, Trader
36	Miner
41	Mountebank, Con Artist, Gambler
42	Mystic
43	Noble
44	Official, Clerk
45	Pirate, Smuggler
46	Priest
51	Prospector, Scavenger, Beachcomber
52	Sailor
53	Scholar
54	Servant
55	Soldier
56	Sorcerer
61	Spy/Assassin
62	Thief, Burglar, Pickpocket
63	Thug, Enforcer
64	Tinker
65	Warrior, Knight
66	Watch Officer

Talents

These are some possible innate abilities for characters; Qualities that make them naturally good at *doing* certain kinds of things. (Remember, these aren't limited to Good at character creation.)

Some have obvious opposites, and some don't. In any case you can take a positive Quality at Poor to show that you're particularly bad at that thing *or* to show that it goes wrong for you, like being so strong that you break things by accident. Conversely, an apparently "negative" trait could actually be a Strength - maybe Cowardly helps you to flee from danger. You can certainly take a paired Strength and Weakness in the same thing, showing that it helps and hinders in different situations. Just be sure, as usual, that you and the GM are clear about your intent for your Qualities.

11	Agile	Clumsy	41
12	Attractive	Ugly	42
13	Brave	Cowardly	43
14	Calm	Nervous	44
15	Charismatic	Insignificant	45
16	Charming	Obnoxious	46
21	Cunning	Guileless	51
22	Eloquent	Tongue-tied	52
23	Intelligent	Stupid	53
24	Knowledgeable	Uneducated	54
25	Nimble-fingered	All Thumbs	55
26	Perceptive	Oblivious	56
31	Quick	Slow	61
32	Rugged	Sickly	62
33	Shrewd	Gullible	63
34	Strong	Weak	64
35	Strong-willed	Weak-willed	65
36	Tough	Fragile	66

Skills

Here's a list of learned areas of expertise. It's not exhaustive, but it does cover most of the staples of fantasy gaming. The skills are loosely organised into thematic groups (so you could pick a group and just roll the units die).

11	Etiquette
12	Music (specify)
13	Oratory
14	Persuasion
15	Socialising
16	Trickery
21	Alchemy
22	Arcane Lore
23	Herbalism
24	History
25	Medicine
26	Natural History
31	Archery
32	Athletics
33	Brawling
34	(weapon) Fighting
35	Intimidation
36	Martial Arts
41	Forgery
42	Locks and Traps
43	Sleight of Hand
44	Stealth
45	Streetwise
46	Theft
51	Animal Handling
52	Climbing
53	Seamanship
54	Survival
55	Swimming
56	Tracking
61	Carousing
62	Craft (specify)
63	Gaming
64	Language (specify)
65	Notice
66	Riding

Personality traits

These are about what the character is *inclined* to do, not what they're *able* to do, but they can still give a bonus or penalty to actions. You could use these as a springboard for Strengths and Weaknesses.

The list is a set of pairs of opposites or complementaries, each representing a scale of one aspect of personality. Go for middle ground, renaming and tangents if you like, and remember that any of these could be a Strength *or* a Weakness.

11	Addicted	Ascetic	41
12	Ambitious	Retiring	42
13	Authoritative	Submissive	43
14	Compassionate	Self-centred	44
15	Conventional	Eccentric	45
16	Disciplined	Disorderly	46
21	Fierce	Timid	51
22	Generous	Greedy	52
23	Honest	Deceitful	53
24	Honourable	Self-serving	54
25	Jolly	Gloomy	55
26	Logical	Passionate	56
31	Loyal	Independent	61
32	Prudent	Impulsive	62
33	Serious	Easygoing	63
34	Sociable	Reserved	64
35	Subtle	Forthright	65
36	Trusting	Suspicious	66

A sample character

We'll go for something simple - a warrior with northern barbarian roots, in a homage to Conan, but young and brash.

The character is for the Six Serpents setting, so the most suitable **People** is the Earth Tribes of Kalet. We have to pick one of the listed Strengths, and Good [+2] Warrior fits. For the mandatory **Faculty** let's pick Good [+2] Strong as a Bear, and for his **Driver** we'll have Good [+2] Seeks Renown as a Great Warrior.

Now we have 5 **Open Quality Ranks** to use. He can stand as much physical beefing up as we can afford, so let's add Good [+2] Agile as a Mountain Lion and use one Rank to raise Warrior from Good [+2] to Expert [+4]. We don't want to make him one-dimensional, though, so let's add Good [+2] Outdoorsman for a bit of skill and Good [+2] Fiery Will for alarming adversaries and overcoming adversity. We have one more Rank to spend. Looking up the Kalets in the setting section, we could take a bit of herb-based Alchemy* but it doesn't quite fit. We could have stuff like Thief or Brigand, but that seems further on in his adventuring career. For an interesting play with penumbras, what about Good [+2] Tougher Than "Civilised" Folk? That'll come into play for resisting hardship, but only when he's somehow being compared to soft southerners.

Now we just need a **Weakness**. Let's go for Poor [-2] Hot-tempered, though Uncivilised for making him ill-at-ease in cities would be good too.

Callum
People: Earth Tribes of Kalet
Strengths: Expert [+4] Warrior, Good [+2] Strong as a Bear, Good [+2] Agile as a Mountain Lion, Good [+2] Tougher Than "Civilised" Folk, Good [+2] Outdoorsman, Good [+2] Fiery Will, Good [+2] Seeks Renown as a Great Warrior
Weakness: Poor [-2] Hot-tempered
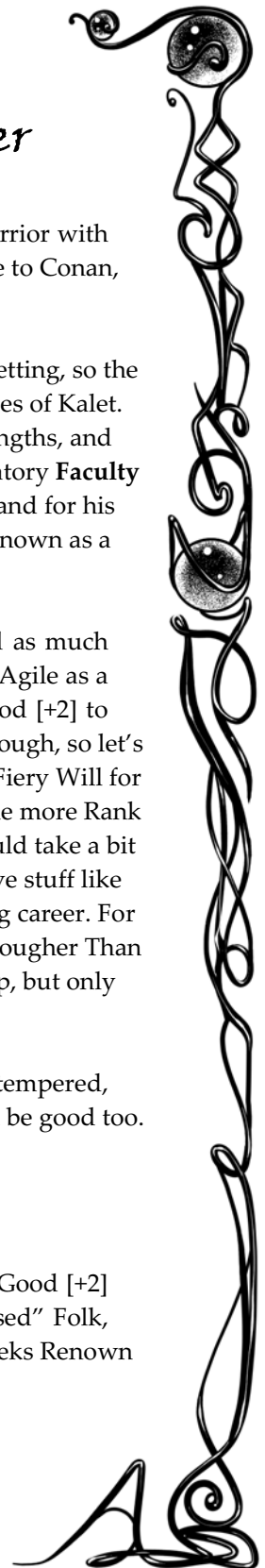
FORTUNE POINTS

These are a mixture of self-esteem, destiny and dramatic importance. They're earned in play and spent to do various things that make the story more interesting and help characters survive and succeed. Once spent they're lost until you get some more. Minor scenes shouldn't have much Fortune changing hands; in dramatic and important scenes it should flow more freely. It's a pretty loose economy; fine-tune to suit your group.

Most minor non-player characters don't have Fortune. Player characters have it because they're the protagonists. (Some of them might even be heroes, but that's not a strict requirement.) Other important characters might have it too, in varying amounts according to how important they are: a trusted lieutenant might have 2, a notable villain 5 (or 1 + the number of players facing them, or whatever).

It's helpful to measure Fortune with some sort of tokens on the table in front of you – many gamers like coloured glass pebbles for this kind of thing – and only alter it on your character sheet to keep track at the end of a session (otherwise the paper soon gets thin and messy).

Spending Fortune

You can spend a Fortune Point to do any of the following.

- **Luck** – after getting a bad result on a dice roll you can make it again, rolling 1d6+6 (or 2d6+6 etc if you were rolling more than the usual two dice due to upshifts) and keeping whichever result you prefer.

- **Hell for Leather** - before making a roll you can decide to put your all into an action. Downshift a Quality that's related to what you're doing in some way - often a personality trait or motivation - and gain an extra 1d6.

- **Narration** - determine one plausible coincidence or minor fact that happens. These are usually related to scenery or objects, sometimes minions, and less often to main characters. They might be useful

tactically, affecting what Qualities can and can't be brought into play and possibly even triggering upshifts or downshifts. For instance, if you say the floor is now slippery with blood you could start adding balance and agility Qualities to combat. (The GM has some power to negotiate in the best interests of the story, but should use it lightly.)

Gaining Fortune

Players gain one Fortune Point at the start of each game session. The GM can award an additional point on the spot for any of the following.

- **Flawless Victory** – succeeding in something that was a notable challenge, like a daring feat or overcoming a powerful opponent.

- **Fickle Finger of Fate** – the GM does something bad to your character that you can't avoid, in the interests of progressing the story (e.g. "The gas knocks you out and you awake in a dungeon").

- **Trouble** - invoking a Weakness to cause a setback (see box below).

- **Indulging** - spending your ill-gotten gains between adventures can boost your Fortune supply (see *Gear, Wealth and Trade* below).

- **GM Discretion** – miscellaneous impressedness with a *player*, like witty dialogue that makes everyone laugh, coming up with a cunning plan or maybe even paying for pizza!

Weaknesses and Trouble

Here's an option to make permanent Weaknesses more interesting and notable parts of the character. They always give [-2] to relevant actions. However, they can also cause Trouble: either an instant Story Hook that causes a problem for the character, or automatic failure (an effective result of zero) on a significant roll.

Each Weakness can be invoked no more than once per scene by the GM *or* the character's player. The player gets a Fortune Point in return for accepting the Trouble - but must pay one to deny the GM's suggestion. A certain amount of negotiation may be possible.
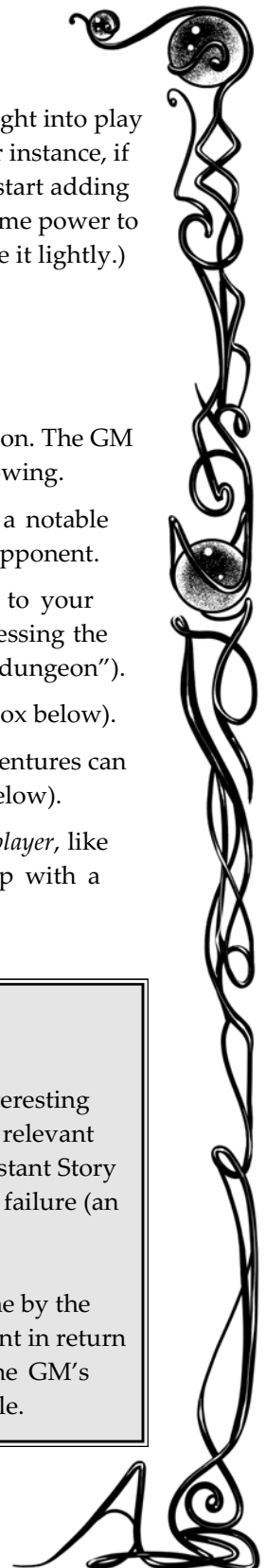
LEARNING POINTS

Learning Points are earned when a character learns something - usually by failing at a complicated task. These Points can be spent to improve a character's Qualities, either learning new ones or increasing the Rank of existing ones. So the more often a character fails, the more they learn - which would suit a story where the characters get sand kicked in their faces several times and eventually rise to overcome great odds.

Gaining Learning Points

There are several things for which the GM awards a Learning Point on the spot. You might find additional situations where it seems merited.

- **Failing a complicated situation** - as long as it has some importance, for instance leading to undesirable consequences. (You might want to rule that it has to involve one of the character's listed Qualities, making it dramatically significant to them, and not an unlisted Average Quality.) Similarly, **losing an important conflict** - and if you're using detailed conflict it probably does have some significance. (The group could win even if one or more characters zero out. The question then is whether they are wiser as a result.)

- **Understanding** - the character has a significant insight into the way things are, or into their own nature.

- **Profound impact** - something that might be termed a "major life event", so that the character will never be quite the same again. One example, suggested elsewhere, is the death of one of their fellows.

It would be unusual to get more than one Learning Point for a given situation.

Whether an event also merits a Fortune Point is up to the GM. Some will merit both; some, one or the other. Fortune is more short-term and ephemeral; Learning is about the steady path of the character's life, each step permanently etched, and should never be trivial.

Gaining Quality Ranks

Spending 4 Learning Points permits a character to raise one Quality by one Rank, to a maximum of Master [+6]. They can only be raised one Rank at once, and this substantial jump on the scale should be justified by events in the story – maybe you've been training with a fencing master or been exposed to some relevant supernatural effect.
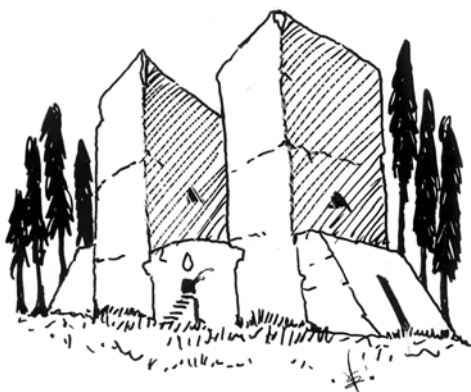
If it's a Quality you didn't have written down before – that is, you're effectively raising one of your invisible Average abilities to Good (or, for some arcane abilities, creating it from thin air at Average) – you must also create a related Story Hook for the GM. If a character wished to learn Sailing, he would have to spend 4 Learning Points and provide the GM with a relevant seed for a future plot, subplot, or adventure that is tied to Sailing ("Hey, maybe I get shanghaied..."). This doesn't apply if it's a specialisation of one you have, like developing Pickpocket from Thief. But you could always come up with a Hook anyway!

Remember that adding Quality Ranks doesn't have to reflect the character getting better at *doing* things. It could be about entanglement with the story or setting, e.g. "Commander of mercenary unit", "King of Aquilonia".

Digging Down Deep

If a character is in big trouble and needs more Fortune Points *now*, they may summon up some heroic energy by spending a Learning Point to get a Fortune Point. Convert as many as you want - but you can't change them back again!
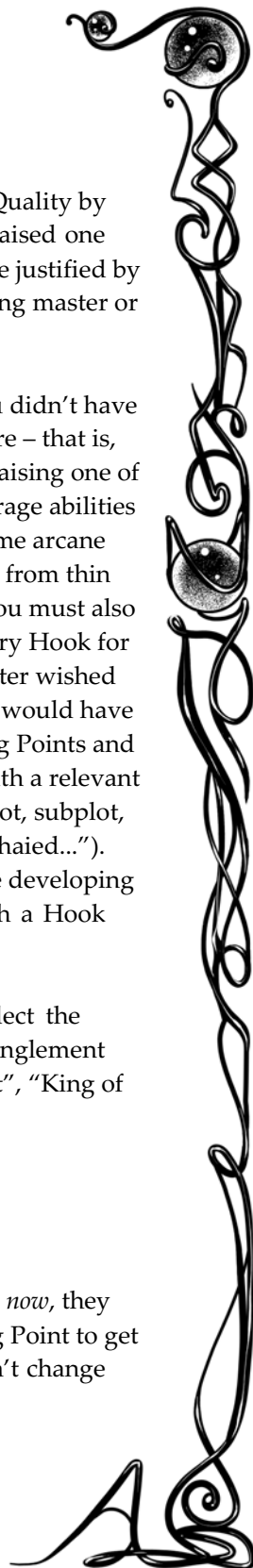
Dark Learning Points

This is an optional addition - not all campaigns will need this for player characters. You need to agree in your group what sorts of things are "*tainted*". Normally in sword and sorcery tales slaying any number of people who get in your way or insult you would not count, but messing around with metaphysical powers man was not meant to know would. That could include associating with demons or sacrificing people for occult power.

Dark Learning points operate in parallel to Learning Points, and in a similar way, but:

- You get them for doing tainted things, and for *succeeding* rather than failing. If you might have got a Fortune Point for that success, you get Dark Learning instead. Optionally, it might come from just *experiencing* the supernatural - e.g. a sorcerer sends a creeping monstrosity of the Dark after the hero and they are changed by this glimpse beyond the fragile circle of light.

- You can only spend them on tainted things. For *gaining Qualities*, that means physical, mental or metaphysical warping away from wholesome normality, from alcoholism to bodily mutation. For *digging down deep* they can only be spent on tainted actions.

So they're kind of about tempting the player. Those points aren't going to sit unused for long. They're also a bit sticky: if you use one to help an action succeed, there's a good chance it'll come back again. The way to get rid of them is to plough them into dubious Qualities, and then players have an incentive to emphasise those tainted aspects of the character. How much of this you want is a style question for your group, but you should probably treat it as seasoning rather than main ingredients if you want characters to stay sympathetic.

There's some overlap with Scars, introduced below, which are *Weaknesses* taking the character away from health and normality. In general Scars are limitations enforced by the GM, whereas tainted Strengths enable the player to use creativity to open things up.

Danger Levels

This is about altering the consequences of zeroing out to reflect different challenges and consequences. There are three levels.

- **Drama.** This is the normal PDQ route. Characters who zero out are unlikely to suffer any lasting harm, and any consequences disappear by the next scene or a few scenes later. However, they may well find themselves in a more challenging situation as a result of being at the mercy of their opponents. "Damage" is about the ebb and flow of the story going the way the characters want.

- **Risk.** In addition to the above, zeroing out brings a long-term consequence: a **Scar**, a new permanent Weakness that reduces the character's performance and may cause Trouble. Supernatural threats and major plot point conflicts are usually Risks. It's a way for the GM to flag a situation as more important and serious than usual.

- **Doom.** A character that zeroes out ends their story - usually through death, but possibly some other final and irrevocable fate. This should be used very sparingly, for situations of the utmost drama - like the climactic confrontation of a storyline.

The level of a Risk or Doom situation is indicated by the GM going in, so the players can judge tactics and choose how to spend their resources. These levels are partly about simulating the peril of a situation, but at least as much about marking crucial points in the story.

Scars

A Scar is a new permanent Poor [-2] Weakness Quality. Because it is permanent it *must* come into play in any future relevant situation (unlike a Quality reduced to Poor by damage).

The Weakness must be plausibly related to the punishment the character just took (physical, mental, social, etc), and agreed between player and
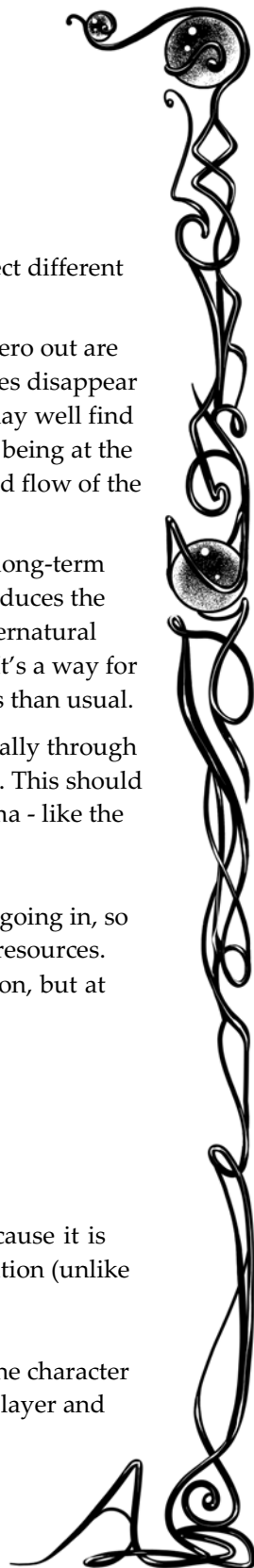
GM. If it was because of being beaten in a sword fight it's probably something physical like Walks With a Limp, Tires Easily or Disfigured Face. If it's a result of seeing some entity from the deep Dark it's probably a phobia or other mental affliction. (It could even be an unnatural fascination, leading the character to seek out such things in future. That relates to the tainted path discussed under *Dark Learning Points* above.) The Scar can't correspond exactly with an existing Strength Quality, but might make interesting connections (like "I can do This really well, except when it involves That"). It might relate to a plot development like being haunted by the memory of someone you couldn't save.

You can potentially get rid of Scars if the GM agrees, there's a relevant notable story event and you spend Learning Points to effectively buy them up to Average, making them invisible again.

Doom

Meeting your Doom. When a character goes to their end, their remaining Fortune Points and Learning Points (but not any Dark Learning Points they might have) are shared as evenly as possible between the others in the group - the player decides where any odd ones go. Everyone gets at least one of each, regardless of whether there are enough to meet that total. The time to gain these points might be when the other characters find out about their companion's fate, if they weren't there.

Rising from the ashes. When a player creates a new character they have a number of Learning Points equal to the number of characters who have previously met their Doom in the story of that group of characters. These can be spent straight away or later.

A GM who inflicts Doom on an unwilling player is probably abusing their position. A player who asks for it to be inflicted on their character is probably entering into the spirit of heroic fantasy.

This is where playing with groups of main characters pays off. In a single character's "series" it would be very unusual to kill them off, but in stories where a group adventure together it's not uncommon for

individuals to sacrifice themselves for the others. You might even agree among yourselves that one character will be the lead, whose story must continue at all costs, and the others their supporting cast who come and go over time. The major downside of character death is that it leaves the player unable to interact with the story, so it's best applied at the end of a large or small story arc so they can introduce a new character soon after.

The GM can also use Doom as a way of directing player choices. By declaring that a certain path of action leads to Doom, and making sure that there is a legitimate alternative, it's the players' choice of whether to take the risky course and accept the consequences if they fail.

Doom could apply locally within an overall situation. On a rickety bridge above a lava lake a warrior fights the man who took his eye so many years ago, with fiery death for the loser - but his companions fighting the villain's minions several yards away on solid ground won't be burned to a cinder should they zero out. Likewise, if the duel manoeuvres its way off the ledge above the volcano then the risk of instant death abates.

Mastery

This is an optional rule that players might find psychologically satisfying, as it makes a feature of those high rolls that can go unused. If a main character is attempting a complicated action or a defence (but not an attack where success is measured in damage Ranks) and gets a result 6 or more greater than needed, they can apply an upshift to a related action that happens straight afterwards. If the bonus is not used on or before their next action it disappears. You can only carry one of these at once, even if you get multiple mastery results.

This chain has to make sense within the story. So cleaving a minor thug in twain (as a complicated situation) would certainly justify an improved chance of intimidating his fellows, but not of turning and swinging across a chasm. In fact the bonus can be given to other characters as well, as long as it's still a sensible chain - like making an opening for your comrade to strike or letting them follow your handholds up the cliff.
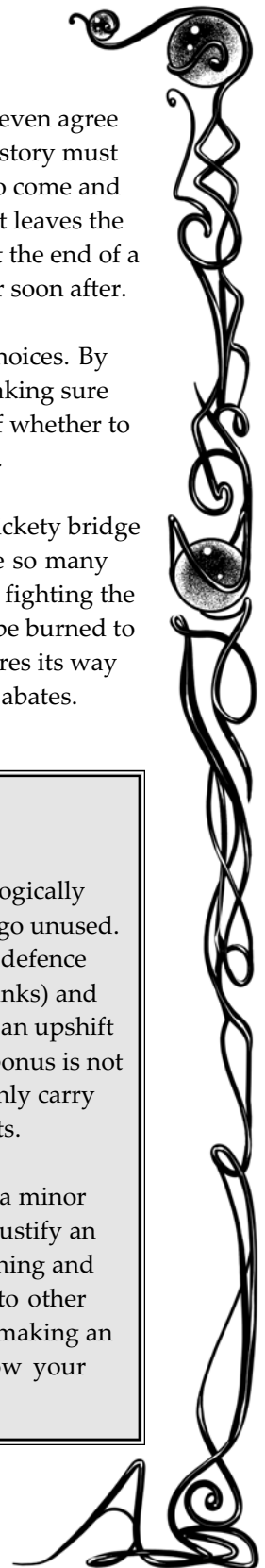
MINIONS

The source material is full of nameless henchmen who are only there to serve as obstacles, enabling the central characters to demonstrate their prowess on the way to some larger challenge, and not presenting much of a challenge to dramatically important fighters.

Minion Qualities

Minions usually have a very small set of Qualities: often just Good [+2] in an occupation like Guard or Thug, giving them a bonus for actions falling in that penumbra. They might have one or two others to emphasise particular capabilities, like Good [+2] Armour for a well-equipped defensive guardian.

Minions in conflict

They can be dealt with as a complicated situation even within an overall conflict situation. That is, if a PC can overcome such a minion's defensive TN it's beaten - no calculation of damage Ranks necessary. (Feel free to describe this victory in an appropriate way.) If you don't overcome its TN there's no effect - your glancing blow wasn't enough to slow it down. The minion's attacks damage the PC in the normal way, whittling down their Quality Ranks.

> *Example:* Darios has reached the treasure chamber of the Assassins' Guild. His path is blocked by a henchman with Good [+2] Assassin. Darios rolls his Good [+2] Cutlass Quality against the henchman's Target Number of 9, and gets 11. He slices the henchman from stem to stern in one blow and continues toward his prize.

Minion "saves"

In some cases you might want to flip things round and have the minions roll and the PC's abilities generate a static Target Number. For instance, if a character tries to intimidate a group of guards it's reasonable that some will flee and some will stay, so you could make a quick roll for each one against the PC's Rank's TN. (If the PC has supplementing Qualities add their MODs to the TN of the basic one - e.g. Expert + Good = TN 13.)

Multiple minions in combat

Minions do not use the standard rules for characters working together, as they'd rapidly become more of a challenge than their status merits. Also, if there's a crowd of them we don't want the players to get bored making lots of defensive rolls. So do it like this instead.

- Each group of attacking minions (of the same type) makes a single attack roll against a PC, requiring a single defence roll.

- If there are two minions, reflect numbers with an upshift (+2) on their attack roll.

- If there are more than two, reflect numbers with an additional **numbers die**, so they're rolling 3d6 plus any Quality MODs. Basically once you get to three or more it all gets a bit chaotic and only so many can find an opening to strike at any given time - the difficulty is in cutting them all down before you're in ribbons.

- PC attacks are against individual minions, resolved as above.

Obviously this means there's an incentive to get the numbers down as quickly as possible! It also allows for a crowd of minions to redistribute themselves freely between opponents as a conflict progresses, for instance ganging up to get the advantage of numbers on the opponent who seems the greatest threat. (Having more than three on an enemy is still worthwhile because it'll keep their advantage in place if the front rank is suddenly cut down. Sooner or later the numbers die will come up high and the PC's defence will roll low; though for a really proficient PC only a big difference will matter.)
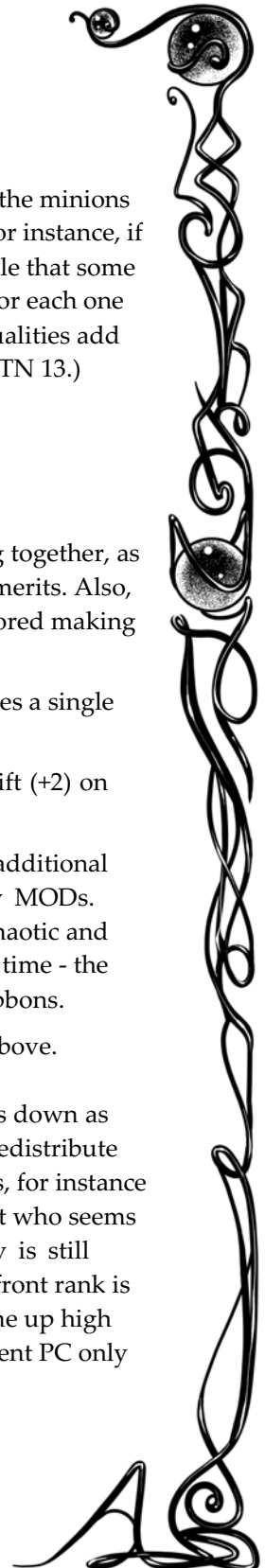
MAGIC

In some fantasy styles magic is a routine part of life. Those who use it and items produced with it are common. In the sword and sorcery end of the pool magic is widely known of but those who practise it are few, and regarded warily by the rest of society. It is never entirely safe or tame, and delving too far into arcane secrets can change you or bring doom. Magical items are rare - often old, powerful and dangerous. Main characters might sometimes know odd bits of magic, but true sorcerers generally fill the role of obstacles to be overcome.

The system presented here has two main kinds of magic. **Sorcery** is powerful and flexible, capable of almost any effect but slow and risky to use. **Charms** are little bits of magical knowledge that can do a single thing with a limited extent, but are at least safe and reliable.

There are also the magic-like skills of **Alchemy** and **Divination**. These tend to crop up fairly often in the source material, often possessed by sorcerously inclined villains. There is a strand in sword and sorcery stories that if a little knowledge can be a dangerous thing, a lot of knowledge is serious trouble. Well, it also makes sense that those who pursue the intellectual arts of the age would be interested in all of them. Practitioners of these skills who aren't sorcerers might know one or two Charms, or even no magic at all. Like Sorcery*, the first Rank bought in these Qualities is Average.

See the *GM's Notes* section of the book for more about ways of implementing magic to suit a setting.

Effects

When magical abilities are used they produce an Effect, which you can think of as a kind of temporary free-floating Quality - for instance Good [+2] Healing, Average [0] Illusion, Expert [+4] Curse of Crushing Pain. The different forms of magic produce and implement their Effects in slightly different ways, but the basics are the same.

The Magic Effects Table overleaf shows how higher Ranks enable you to do more with a spell. Some of these properties are more about the **extent** of the Effect - broadly, how much it can affect - and some are more about its **intensity** - how powerful the Effect is at any given point. As the Effect Rank goes up Sorcery advances in as many columns as apply, but other forms of magic usually go up in only one property that's key to the spell (often a form of intensity), with everything else locked at Average.

Be creative in using the simple building blocks of the system to apply an Effect. As a general guide:

- use the Rank's MOD to count numbers of things (Average is always taken as 1 rather than 0 for counting) or to boost other Qualities

- use the Rank's Target Number for resistance against physical or mental damage or some unwelcome consequence.

In some cases the response might simply be, "It happens as you desired."

Sample Effect types

- **Healing** is probably more likely as a Charm among specific healer types than as a use of Sorcery. It restores [MOD] damage Ranks.

- **Damage** effects use Rank TN like environmental damage: resist with any Qualities that are appropriate to that kind of harm, like Sturdy Constitution or Iron Will, and take any difference as damage Ranks.

- **Illusion** has two main applications. The most usual is to affect people's behaviour. It's not normal to question one's perceptions, so unless there's some compelling reason to do so (like a completely

Magic Effects Table

RANK, MODIFIER, TARGET NUMBER	TIME/ DURATION	RANGE	AREA	NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	WEIGHT	FORCE	ENERGY
Poor [-2] [5]	1 action/ reaction (5 minutes)	Touch. (12 in.)	Closet (1sq yard)	1	Objects up to 1-hand weapon	Punch	Candle
Average [0] [7]	1 Turn (30 minutes)	Near (10 yards)	Room (25 sq yards)	10	Heavy person (250 lbs.)	Full tilt body check	Campfire
Good [+2] [9]	1 Scene (1 hour)	Unaided sight	Field	100	Bear, horse, small rowing boat	Sturdy club	Bonfire
Expert [+4] [11]	2 Scenes (6 hours)	A few miles	Square mile	1000	Laden wagon	Runaway wagon	Forest fire
Master [+6] [13]	4 Scenes (24 hours)	A few hundred miles	City and immediate environs	Entire city/country	Ship	Cannonball	Volcano

unbelievable illusion, or perhaps seeing an obvious sorcerer type waving their arms around) those affected will react to the illusion as if it were real. The second application is to cause mental shock and damage from an illusion that's particularly horrifying. In most cases the main property of an illusion will be its extent. You might want to use the sorcerer's other Qualities, like creativity or depravity, in any resistance contest.

- **Summoning a demon from the Dark** - of course people do this in the source material - though hopefully the PCs won't be making a habit of it! Such a creature can be built by taking the Effect's [TN - 1] as a number of MOD points to spend on Qualities. So a Good Effect, with TN 9, could give a demon four Good [+2] Qualities. The *Monsters* section later on has lots of ideas for creature Qualities. Beings from the Dark that are encountered in other ways may be more powerful than this.

- **Summoning mundane creatures** - as an example of applying the rules, you could specify such a creature very simply as Good at being its type, like Good [+2] Wolf, and use MOD as the number that turn up.

Sorcery

This is a freeform creation of magical Effects, potentially very powerful. It's assumed that a sorcerer is well-versed in gathering and channelling energies to produce a wide range of results. There is no list of spells - you just define the effect you want to create and use the Effects Table to look up the Rank required for your desired duration, range, and so on. Each Rank lets you expand any or all properties of the spell to the listed levels.

Gathering power

A spell is made by gradually accumulating energy till it reaches the desired level of power. So you're actually building the Effect, one Rank at a time, starting at Poor. A sorcerer can cast a Poor Rank cantrip as a single action, which is handy for special effects like lighting candles with a wave
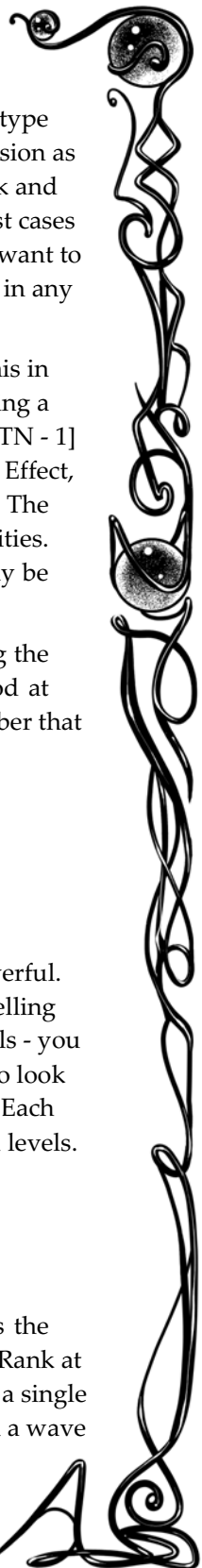
of your hand, but most useful Effects require more power. Gathering each Rank takes an action and requires the sorcerer to check that they can keep control of the mounting energy. Once the required Rank is reached it takes an action to focus and release the spell.

Keeping control

Your Sorcery* Rank dictates the level of power you can handle safely. Each time you attempt to add a Rank of power, make a Sorcery* roll with that Rank as the TN. If you succeed you can carry on building the spell. If not, the energy escapes from your control: you take the difference as Damage Ranks and there are likely to be effects on the surrounding area too. The perils of one's reach exceeding one's grasp are drummed into novices.

Magic is unpredictable stuff. A roll of double 1's automatically fails, causing at least one Rank of damage, regardless of the total (though Fortune might help).

Sorcery above Average Rank has the "Risk" Danger Level, so if you zero out from this there will be long-term effects, leaving you with debilities or... *alterations*.

Drawing from sources

In some settings the power for a spell might simply be called to a sorcerer through the ether; in others each Rank must be drawn from a particular kind of source, so the power available at that place and time limits what magic can be done. In the world of the Six Serpents sorcerers draw on the different Urge energies (see setting section); other worlds you create might have different ones. Drawing on a source with a Quality for magical power downshifts it for the rest of the scene. Possible sources of power fall into the following categories.

- your own internal energy or life-force (decide what Qualities can be used to fuel this - an individual shouldn't be good for many Ranks of energy);

- the energy or life-force of another person – although you can only access this at the moment of death, so many sorcerers resort to human sacrifice;

- the energy of the surroundings - though there are likely to be temporary or even permanent side effects of this - like drawing off Fire energy making the area colder - which get more pronounced the more you take (you can make common sense assumptions about locations having appropriate Poor, Average or Good levels of a particular energy);

- a special object that can act as a sort of battery for a type of energy.

Sorcery in play

Player character sorcerers. You can certainly do this, and it could be quite interesting. You shouldn't usually have more than one or two in the group though. They will wrestle with questions of power versus conscience, and it's expected that they will choose to limit themselves to some extent, where their NPC counterparts often won't.

Doesn't Sorcery* do a lot for one Quality? Yes, it does. However, it's set up to be used for occasional dramatic effect rather than as frequent artillery. You simply aren't going to be able to do a lot of impressive sorcery within a scene - so you also need to invest in other Qualities to look after your own survival (and to support your effectiveness as a sorcerer).

Special cases

Rituals. If you take at least five minutes over each gathering phase instead of just a few seconds, and have suitable trappings, you can take an upshift to control checks.

Distraction. If you are distracted during your preparations, for instance by being struck with a weapon, you must make an additional control test (*after* applying any damage Ranks) at the current Effect Rank.

Abandoning a spell. This just takes an action to dissipate the energy safely (it doesn't go back to the sources you drew it from).
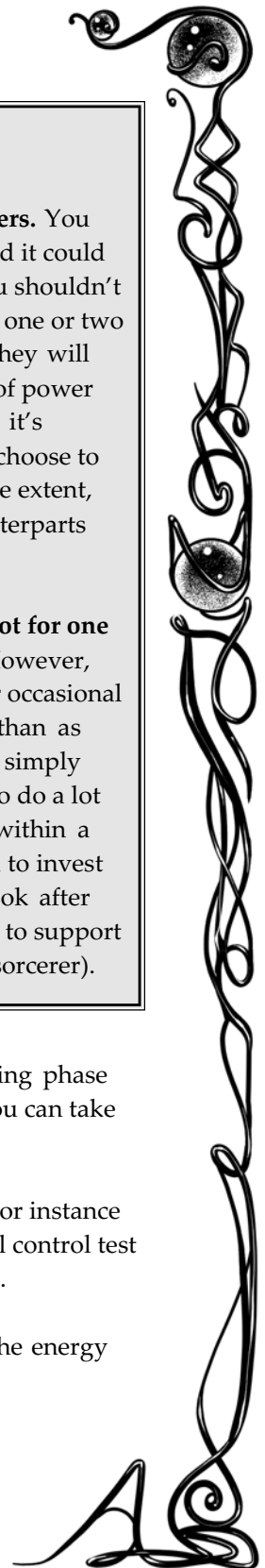
Sorcery example

Malakar finds a clan of desert tribesmen camped by the ancient ruins he wants to explore, and wishes to get rid of them - one way or another. He decides to summon a carpet of scorpions.

There are two key quantities here. The wave of vermin must be big enough to do the job. Let's call that Area on the Effects Table. Average won't really be enough; it has to be Good. Then there's the intensity. This partly depends on whether the GM is bothered for having the tribesmen resist, or whether it'll just work. Resistance could be against damage, or against fear caused by the sight, leaving victims dead or fleeing into the desert. Anyway, let's say that Good will do.

Malakar has, as it happens, Good [+2] Sorcery*. Let's not worry about drawing power from sources for now; it's freely available. On the first round Malakar is attempting to gather power to raise the Effect from Poor to Average [TN 7]. He rolls 8 and adds his Sorcery* MOD for 10, making it easily.

Next he attempts to build the power up to Good [TN 9]. Unfortunately he rolls a mere 4, so his total is 6. That would leave him losing control of the spell and taking 9-6=3 Damage Ranks. Maybe a small colony of irate scorpions emerges from the sand to climb his legs and scare his group's horses. Alternatively he could spend a Fortune Point for a re-roll - if he manages to wrestle the magic under control after all, on his next action he can unleash eight-legged hell on the unsuspecting camp.

A nasty GM might, of course, have been checking whether sentries had noticed all this chanting and made an abrupt interruption.

Charms

What about other people learning sorcery? Well, they can and they can't. The flexible (and dangerous) full form is only available to full-fledged sorcerers (that is, characters whose Qualities support that concept). However, other characters might be able to learn one or two **Charms**. These are arcane formulae originally derived from sorcery - perhaps long, long ago - that accomplish a fairly specific effect with a modest extent. They're rather like cantrips boosted by long experience.

While sorcery is big and dangerous, Charms are small and simple - and some people prefer them for that reason. It's suggested that Charms be limited to a small number of character backgrounds that might reasonably include dabbling in arcane knowledge - at least at the start of play (such as astrologers and priests, and possibly certain Peoples).

Charm Qualities are bought similarly to Sorcery*, with the first Rank at Average, and should be marked with an asterisk to show they're special. *Examples:* Good [+2] Charm: Healing*, Average [0] Charm: Move Object*.

Here are the main ways they differ from sorcery.

- Their Effect Rank is limited: only one key property (the most appropriate for that spell, usually to do with intensity - like the difficulty of resisting) goes up with your Rank in the Quality and the rest are locked at Average, setting limits for range, area and so on.

- There's no need to build power for them - it just takes a round of concentration and muttering the words. (There might, however, be some requirement about the *availability* of appropriate power sources. In the Six Serpents world, a Charm won't work if the caster or surroundings are deficient in the appropriate Urge.)

- It costs a Failure Rank of fatigue each time you use a Charm.

Dedicated Charm users may have an overarching Quality called **Charmcraft*** that covers knowledge of Charms and how to do more specialised things with them, notably binding them into objects. This is described below.
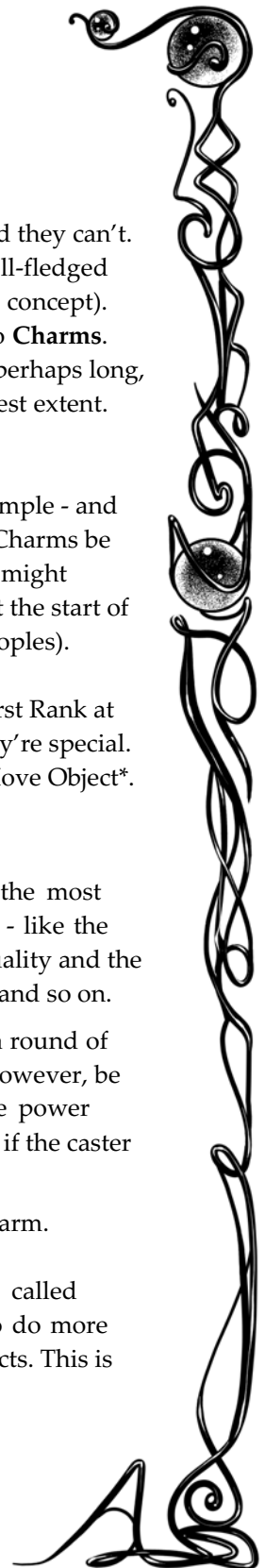
Priests and magic

In the sword and sorcery end of the fantasy pool, being a priest of some god's cult mainly involves knowledge, possibly arcane, and social status, possibly involving minions. The gods don't make overt interventions in the world, and following them doesn't involve channelling their power into mighty magics. That said, it's fairly common for priests to know a Charm or two relevant to their cult. These work the same as other Charms - it's just the knowledge of them that's special (and guarded).

Of course, that's not to say these are unimportant magics. As a well-trodden example, some such cults actually serve entities of the outer Dark and know rituals for summoning servitor creatures from there.

In other settings priests might have a thematically limited form of sorcery, e.g. Sorcery of Living Things* - still flexible but only for certain kinds of effect. For balance you'd probably want to make all sorcery in the setting limited in this way.

Magical items

Overall, these are in much shorter supply than they would be in a high fantasy setting. Those encountered are most likely to be Charm items that can cast a modest spell and alchemical preparations - both good for a single use only. Their creation is explained in the next few pages. Powerful sorcerous artefacts are rare, usually acting as plot devices that only hang around for the length of a story.

Where are all the +1 weapons?

There aren't any. Well, that's not strictly true. Some weapons have a Quality like Good [+2] Sword to reflect superior workmanship, material or whatever, and they are highly sought after. There are also artefact

items infused with sorcerous powers, but they are very rare and very highly sought after (by both natural and supernatural agents).

In general, though, in this style of fantasy warriors don't get too attached to their weapons. They'll acquire one and use it till it gets broken, knocked into a pit or whatever - at which point they'll pick up a new one from the nearest fallen foe and carry on. The weapon is only a tool that allows them to apply their might or finesse.

Sorcerous items

Sorcery can create items with magical Qualities embedded permanently: either as some property of the object or as a spell that can be cast repeatedly. This is not done often in the current age - you can assume not all modern sorcerors know how, and it's a difficult process. Older civilisations were keener on such artefacts, and sometimes these emerge in the present day - usually bringing great trouble. In general these will only appear as part of the plot, or if a player has given their character a sorcerous artefact by purchasing its powers as character Qualities.

Alchemy

This is the art of combining physical materials through certain processes to create end products with a desired effect - corrosive acids, healing salves, anaesthetic gases and so on. It's rather like a precursor of modern science, but as this is fantasy the effects can vary quite widely. Practitioners can have different styles, from nature-oriented herbalists to academic scholars. The common factors are that it requires time, ingredients and equipment. Alchemy* is one of those abilities found more often among NPCs in the source material, helpful or hostile, but players might wish to dabble.

It's a bit like Charmcraft* in creating items for one-off use, but like Sorcery* as the effects are freeform. What's possible depends very much on the style of your game, but is more "grounded" than Sorcery. As a
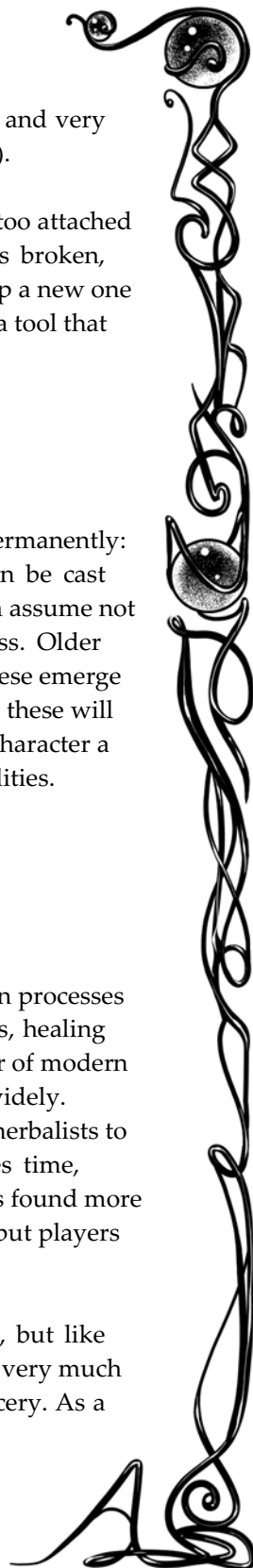
baseline, think of useful effects that aren't too obviously flashy or magical: healing injuries and fighting disease, enhancing faculties, drugs and poisons, etc.

Alchemical preparations are **Props**. These are explained more fully in *Gear, Wealth and Trade* a bit later on. The short version is that they're Qualities characters can carry around and use, but they're not part of the character so they can't absorb damage and aren't permanent. A preparation can be written down like any other Effect, with a note that it's a potion or whatever. So a preparation is made according to the rules below, carried around until it's used, and then disappears. It can also be given to someone else so they can use it.

Creation

- A preparation's Rank is the creator's Alchemy* Rank at the time it's created. When used, the Effect is restricted: the Rank applies to only one property (decide what's most appropriate) and the rest are locked at Average.

- Each time a preparation is created in a scene, Alchemy* is downshifted. So the Quality Rank sets how much you can make and how good it is. For example, if you have Expert [+4] Alchemy* you can make an Expert, a Good, and an Average before you must stop.

Prerequisites

Creation takes minutes or hours of work - use duration on the Effects Table as a guide - so it usually takes place in a **downtime scene** (one scene covering all the time when the PCs are between interesting adventures), with the character creating as many preparations as their Rank allows. Write them on your character sheet. Characters might try to brew something in an action scene, but must be able to take enough time.

You also need some space where you can work undisturbed, and the right equipment. It's assumed that the Alchemy* Quality includes a portable kit of ingredients and tools.

All of this gives the GM plenty of opportunity to use the plot or the Fortune Point options to stop a character using Alchemy* temporarily on occasion - the balance for its flexibility. One option, if a very specific or powerful preparation is being attempted, is to require wealth Props equal to the Rank to be spent to get special ingredients; or even a quest to find something specific.

Charmcraft

This covers knowledge of Charms - the user goes beyond having a random collection of bits of magic and starts to understand the underlying patterns, helping them to identify Charms that are encountered and to do more with their own magic.

One of the key uses of Charmcraft* is to create Charm items. These are simply objects with a Charm Quality embedded, ready to use when needed – this usually requires a trigger word, phrase or action. The magic can only be used once, and then is gone.

They work quite similarly to Alchemy* preparations. Charm items are probably more likely to be Props supplied by helpful NPCs, but here are the rules for players who want to dabble.

- You can only embed a Charm you know. A Charm item's Rank is the lower of the creator's Charmcraft* Rank at the time it's created and their Rank in the Quality for that particular Charm. When used, the Effect is restricted: the Rank applies to only one property (decide what's most appropriate) and the rest are locked at Average.

- Each time an item is created in a scene, Charmcraft* is downshifted. So the Quality Rank sets how much you can make and how good it is. For example, if you have Expert [+4] Charmcraft* you can make an Expert, a Good, and an Average before you must stop.

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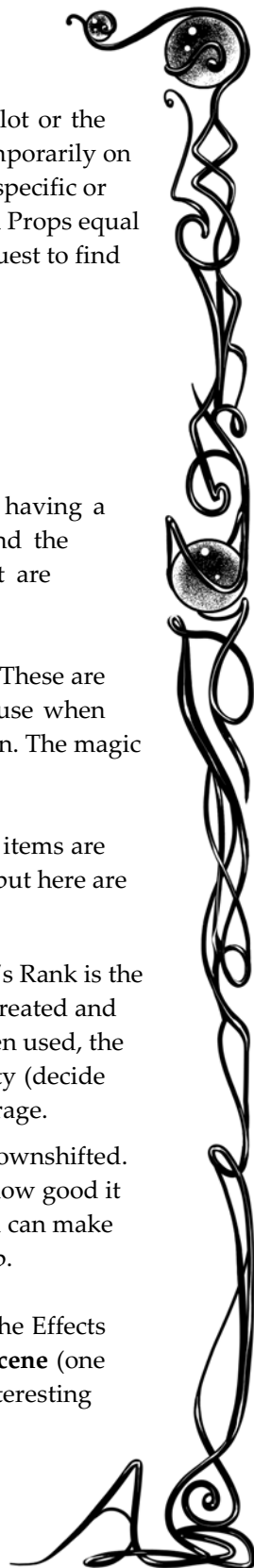
adventures), with the character creating as many items as their Rank allows. Characters might try to knock something together in an action scene, but need to be able to take enough time.

Divination

Astrologers are scholars who scan the night sky for signs and portents, often keeping detailed records of their observations. Others might cast runestones, breathe vapours or inspect the innards of sacrificed animals. They're all seers, using different styles and trappings of Divination*, the ability to glimpse the future and perceive what is hidden or far away.

A setting probably has a very small number of people with high Ranks in Divination*, and they are likely to be well known figures who spend their lives in heavily guarded temples or inaccessible caves. Most practitioners will be at Average or Good (and this should certainly be true of PC seers).

The Divination* Quality covers the following.

- Knowledge about how it works and any body of previous prophecies.

- Given time and suitable trappings the seer can attempt to glimpse the probable future in regard to some person, place or object with which they're connected. For a PC, this is an invitation to the GM to use them to channel plot. The GM can either accept a Fortune Point to deliver usefully relevant and accurate information, or pay a Fortune Point to frustrate the character's attempt (used especially if it would derail the plot).

- Divination* can also take a temporary Downshift to dictate a plausible coincidence or minor fact about the current scene that the character has predicted in advance, usually for the purpose of making retroactive preparations ("I foresaw that someone would take a dangerous fall, so I brought this rope along"). The GM might allow this to adjust what Props the character has (see *Gear, Wealth and Trade* below).

GEAR WEALTH TRADE

There's a long tradition in fantasy gaming of accumulating gold coins, jewellery and valuable antiques, as well as finely crafted weapons and tools. In the *Jaws* style of fantasy characters tend to be a mercenary lot, particularly likely to be motivated to adventure by the prospect of loot - though paradoxically the valuables themselves aren't actually that important to the story except as a way to draw characters into trouble.

Still, we want to be sure we can cater for equipment and loot in the rules. That throws up some challenges in PDQ: everything is measured in Qualities; Qualities are part of characters; and Ranks in Qualities make characters tougher. We don't want ill-gotten gains to effectively lead to character improvement. To address this we need to add Props.

Props

These are Qualities characters can carry around and access, but they're not part of the character. That means three things:

- they won't take damage for you (but see *Dramatic Exit* below);
- they can be taken away from the character permanently;
- they're not a renewable resource (when depleted they don't recover).

So when PCs find the treasure vault below the ruins what they get is a Prop Quality, Expert [+4] Gold and Jewels. Props might be "owned" by one character or, quite often in adventuring groups, held in common for use as needed. Well, obviously someone has to actually carry an item, but they can allow benefits to apply to a colleague.
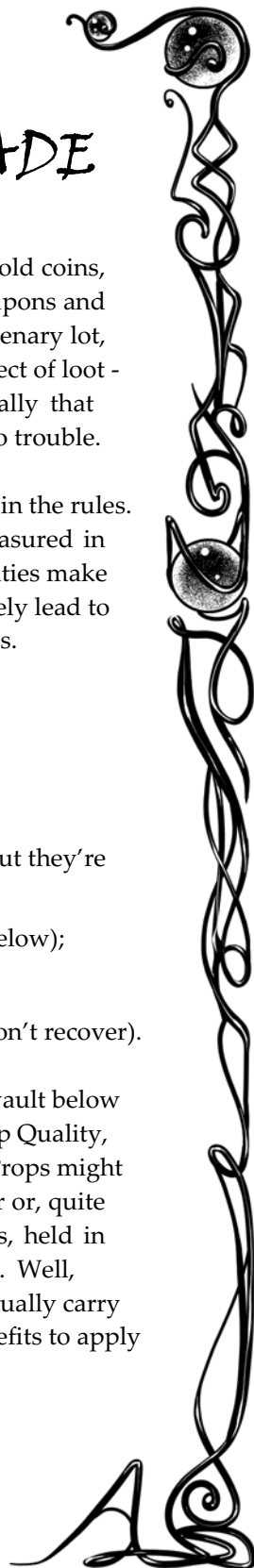
In fact, in most cases the acquisition of a Prop should be a signal to the GM to come up with story developments that *will* take it away or use it up, generating new exploits for the characters in the process.

Players can **invest** in a Prop, using Learning Points to buy its abilities. The item becomes part of their character, but only the Quality Ranks that have been bought are available for use – any others are simply not appearing in the story any more, unless bought back up again.

Types of Prop

- **Bonus** – the item has one or more Quality Ranks that are there all the time. These are generally more useful than flashy, like a Weatherproof [+4] Cloak or a Fast [+2] Horse.

- **One–shot** - you can use it once and that's it. That's certainly true of a Healing Potion that gets drunk or a Gold Crown that gets spent in trade – these use their MOD as a bonus, once.

- **Repeat** – the item can do something special once per scene on an ongoing basis. Maybe it could "really" be used more often, but it's a Prop so in story terms it only gets brought in when dramatically appropriate. This one's particularly used for items with active magical powers, if the characters ever get such a thing.

- **Supply** – these are collections of small things like a Good [+2] Bag of Coins. They can be used all at once like a One-Shot, but can also
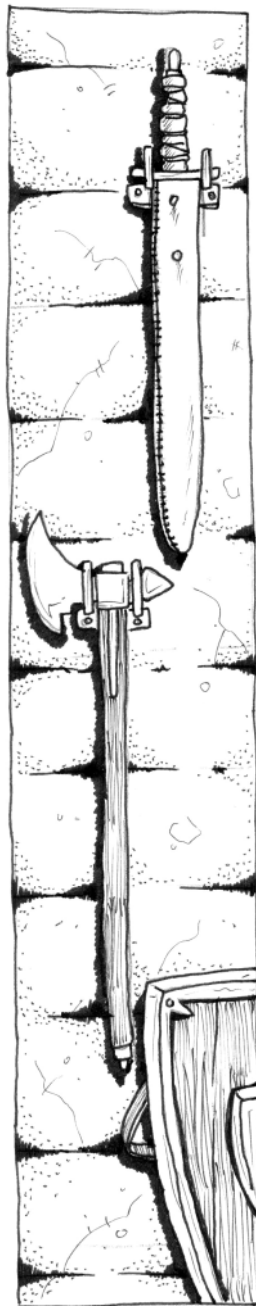
be used a little at a time, burning off a Rank for an upshift on a roll. When the item zeroes out (you use the Poor Rank) it becomes useless or unimportant. If you have ten similar Supply Props you can convert them to a single item of the next Value Rank up.

Dramatic Exit

You can't take damage Ranks on Prop Qualities, but there is one way they can help you avoid damage. Subject to a sensible narration of how it happens, you can use the Prop's Target Number to add to a defence in return for the Prop getting destroyed or lost to the character permanently. (This will often negate an attack entirely.) You can add this on to a roll you've just made and don't fancy much. For instance, it looks like a gout of sorcerous flame is going to cook your goose, but you sacrifice the shield you grabbed from one of the guards, leaving it a smoking ruin. Or you manage to bribe or distract an opponent by forfeiting your Bag of Gold Coins. You can only do this once per scene.

Raiding the scenery

Players might sometimes seek to use the described surroundings by grabbing an object for a one-off use, as a sort of ephemeral Prop. This can be done by:

- Tapping into the GM's description of the area;
- Detaching one of the unremarkable "shadow items" associated with a character Quality by taking a Damage Rank to that Quality for loss of effectiveness, e.g. selling your *Swordplay* sword;
- Using a Fortune Point for coincidentally discovering or possessing some plausible item.

Once grabbed, nobody can use that exact item type in that exact way again in that game session (to avoid a landslide of boring copycat behaviour). These ephemeral Props are Average, mundane items. Once they've served their purpose they dissolve back into the background. The entire process is, of course, subject to common sense and GM decision.
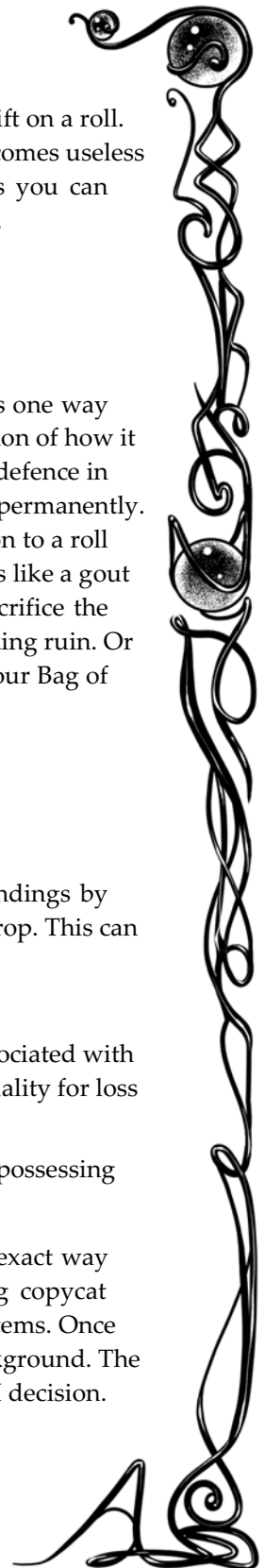
Trade

You might want to trade to convert an item you've found into cold, hard cash, or exchange it for another item, or to purchase services.

Value Scale

This scale tells you what Value Rank goods and services should have: look at what sort of person would find it a significant but do-able purchase, neither trivial nor astronomical.

- Poor – struggling to make ends meet, or with no property of one's own – beggar, slave. A few bronze pieces.

- Average – ordinary trader, artisan, farmer, etc., getting by fairly well. A few silver pieces.

- Good – prosperous trader or crafter, minor noble. A few gold pieces.

- Expert – most nobles, successful merchant. Tens of gold pieces.

- Master – kings, richest nobles, leaders of powerful merchant houses. Hundreds of gold pieces.

Assigning item Value. In most cases you can just pick the right Rank for a given item. Bread is very cheap; ships are very expensive. Value-type Qualities like Pearl-Encrusted Brooch set the base Value Rank. Function-type Qualities like Good [+2] Sword use the base item's value but add their MODs to any trading rolls so it's easier to talk them up. Magical or supernatural Qualities give an upshift to Value - as long as the other party is convinced they exist and is interested in such scary items!

Basic trade

Trade is always about parties exchanging goods or services with Value of the same Rank bracket. If you don't want to spend time on the detail of a trade just say a straight exchange goes through.
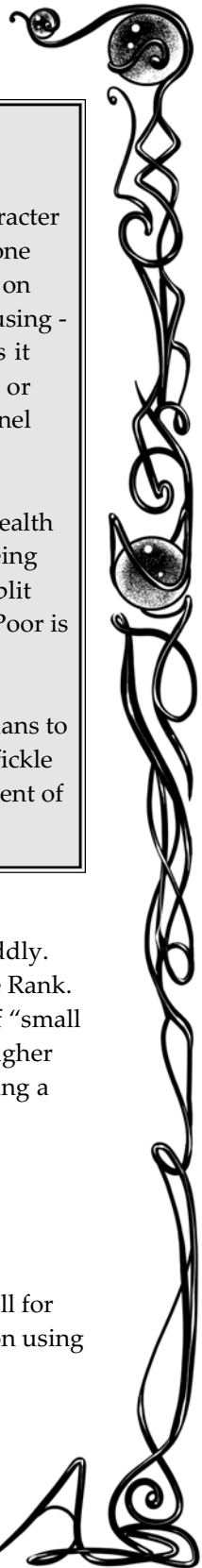
Indulging

It's a staple of the genre that no matter how much treasure a character amasses on an adventure, by the start of the next story it's all gone and they're looking for gainful employment again. It gets spent on indulging their lust for life. For most characters that means carousing - "wine, women and song", or some analogue thereof. For others it might mean alchemical experiments with expensive ingredients, or even helping widows and orphans - however it is that they channel their passion.

In game terms, with a suitable justification players can cash in wealth Props for Fortune Points, reflecting an increased sense of well-being and living up to their heroic destiny. It gives [MOD] Points, split between the owners of the item as agreed. Average counts as 1; Poor is too poxy to help at all. Supply Props have to be spent in one go.

This nicely makes the players willing accomplices to the GM's plans to deprive them of their Props - after all, if they don't use the stuff fickle fate might take it anyway - and leaves them with just an assortment of loose change, hungry for the next adventure.

Supply Props like a Good [+2] Pouch of Coins are slightly more fiddly. A Supply with Value *equal* to the trade is depleted, reducing it one Rank. A Supply of *higher* Value Rank can normally cover the trade out of "small change" without being depleted. However, if it's only one Rank higher the GM can invoke the Fickle Finger of Fate and deplete it by paying a Fortune Point, but can only do one of these per scene.

The Deal

If you want to play out the detail the above still applies but you roll for the effectiveness of bargaining as a complicated or conflict situation using appropriate Qualities.

The winner gets a **sweetener** from the loser: some agreeable Prop of the next Value Rank down thrown into the deal.

The GM can reflect the **attitude** of the other party with an upshift or downshift if they're particularly interested or uninterested in the deal. For instance, it's unlikely that a merchant with a good supply of fine blades feels a pressing need to add your rusty scimitar to his stock.

WORLD OF THE
SIX SERPENTS

An Overview

This is an example of how you can build on the basic rules to create an adventuring world. Feel free to use what you like and discard elements that don't suit you. Hopefully even the latter will be useful illustrations.

Most of the land is wilderness of one kind or another, often harsh and holding dangers, from weather to wild creatures to the occasional supernatural visitation. Most people gather together in settlements. (If you meet someone living out in the wilderness they're probably weird, extremely tough, not what they seem or fallen on hard times - or some combination thereof.) By modern standards there aren't large numbers of people at this point in the setting's history.

People

Technology is what you might call "dark age": there are skilled practitioners of craft trades like masonry and metalwork, but the sailing ship is pretty much the pinnacle of complex engineering. Sorcery and alchemy are the bleeding edge of "science".

The setting has all the sorts of **occupations** one might expect: mercenary warriors, thieves, minstrels, courtesans, crafters, diplomats, scribes, farmers, hunters, sailors…

There are more arcane callings too. **Sorcerers** have learned to manipulate Urge flows through arcane formulae and the power of the will. Given enough skill and the right circumstances they can achieve almost anything – but it is a dangerous pursuit, and mistakes can cost dearly. There's also the fact that a lot of people fear and distrust sorcerers. It is often a lonely path; for many sorcerers, in the end, power is their only companion. **Seers** exist in many guises, like old crones sniffing the vapours and hawk-nosed priests inspecting the intestines of a sacrifice (animal or otherwise). But probably the most common are astrologers,

who examine the positions of the stars, and geomancers who perceive the influence of the Serpents and their Urges in the landscape and deduce the fortunes of a place.

Different cultural groups have their own **religious** beliefs and practices, usually following a single deity or a small number. None of these are dominant in the setting, and there's no particular evidence to prove they're "real". Some priests have access to appropriate magics, and while some might treat these as miraculous proof most folk just regard it as something learned types do.

One belief that *has* spread widely is the Cult of the Worthy Ancestors. They believe that these ancestors, also known as the Good Spirits, watch over mortal folk and stand in opposition to the Dark Below and the strife between the Serpents. On one level it's quite a simple and comforting belief, and many ordinary people pay at least lip service to it. Priests of the Cult are called Intercessors, and they have the ability to interact with the Ancestors for brief periods. More on them below.

Geography

The western coast

The waves of the Westmare are travelled by many vessels, both merchantmen and the pirates that prey upon them - but still few enough that you can go days without seeing another sail, or arrive at an island that has never been named or charted, with ancient (and, inevitably, deadly) secrets.

The great city of **Sartain** dominates the middle region of the coast. The natural dangers of the area have been tamed, for the most part, but the hearts of civilised men hold their own dangers. While visiting its bustling markets and sumptuous courts, remember to look over your shoulder.

Further north lie wilder hills, moors and valleys. These are the **Kalet Lands**, home to the Kalet people, also known as the Earth Tribes - warlike
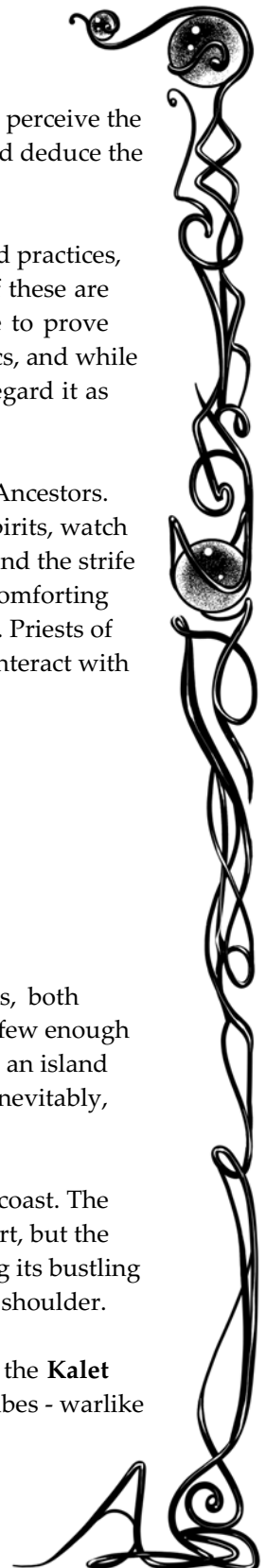
farmers and hunters who live in simple steads and follow the earth goddess. The small sea-town of **Bryhope** has long served as a place for meetings between different clans, and for trade with the outside world. Between clan tensions and boisterous carousing it can run a little warm for some visitors, but fair words and a strong arm will gain acceptance.

The southern peninsula

To the south the land juts out in a great tongue that separates Westmare from the Sea of the Moon. On the eastern shoulder, in a fine natural bay, stands the city of **Nilsomar**. Amid its minarets and markets are a

NORTHLANDS

WESTMARE

Bryhope

KALET LANDS

BLACKWORM RIVER

THE EASTERN SLOPES

Sartain

River Towns

Narrowhome

QUEGIN ISLANDS

Ahaan

Mirage

Nilsomar

THE EMPTY CUP

Temisarum

SEA OF THE MOON

Blood Rock
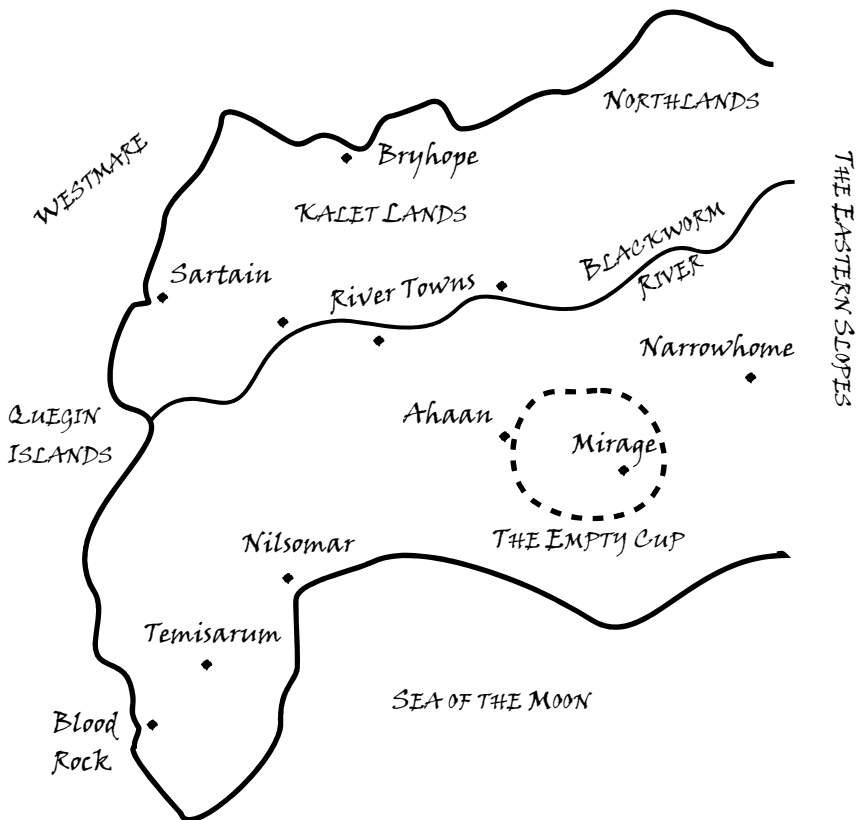
thousand things to delight the senses, but while the city and its people have a flamboyant exterior their hearts are secret.

The peninsula itself is mostly covered in forest, a warm and humid place with deep shade where the canopy grows tall and thick, and drifting mists that are the subject of various legends. Civilised folk rarely venture here. The forest hides many things, both ancient and recent. One of these is the ruined city of **Temisarum**, inhabited by tribal hunters with a strange nocturnal lifestyle. **Blood Rock** is a small shanty town on the coast, huddling uneasily in the shadow of the jungle, where traders and pirates get supplies and swap tales of sea beasts and strange islands.

The Empty Cup

In the interior is a great area of desert within a nearly circular depression. It's rock and sand punctuated by occasional scrubby vegetation. More rarely, one finds broken remnants of buildings in an ancient style. Scholars' tales say that once great cities stood here, and empires prospered, but all was wiped out in some unimaginable cataclysm. Now it is dust beneath the traveller's feet - but best to tread carefully, because although there may well be treasures to be found in some of these ruins they're not all as deserted as one might suppose.

There are travel routes across the Cup, which are reasonably safe if one sticks to them and camps in company. There are a couple of places of interest in this area. The half-city of **Ahaan** stands at one edge, the sole survivor of ancient times, broken by the edge of the cataclysm. It is a place of mystery and shadow, whose people have a dark and sorcerous heritage. Elsewhere, at the largest of the rare bodies of water, is **Mirage** -
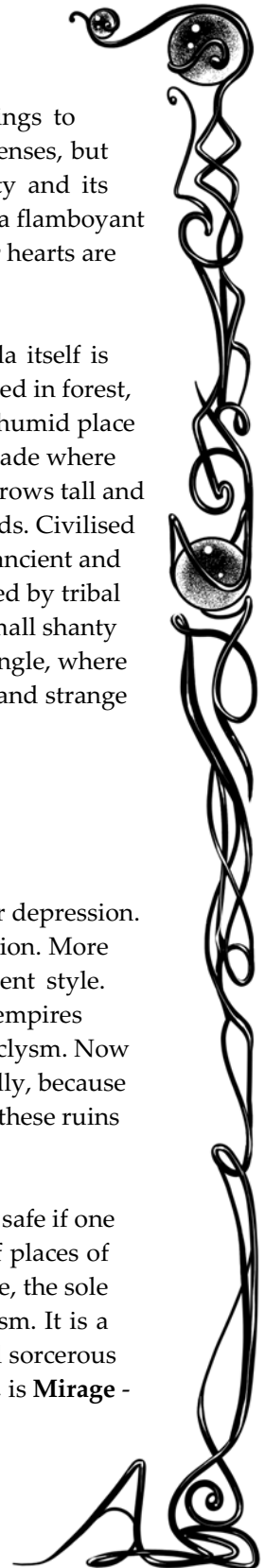
a town of tents, ever-shifting as travellers come and go, changing its size and shape from one day to the next. It doesn't have a People of its own, though some individuals do take up semi-permanent residence. It's overseen by a Market Guild and its Wardens; many things can be bought and sold without hindrance, but the sanctity of trade itself is the lifeblood of Mirage and is protected diligently.

Blackworm River

The largest watercourse in the land begins in the cold slopes of the north-east and winds its way right across to the west coast. It's an important travel route for much of its length. The three **River Towns** that stand on its banks in the central region form a loose trade alliance, and are known for their craft goods.

The broad estuary meets the Westmare a way south of Sartain. It is dotted with small islands, and here live the **Quegin** people, tribal fishers and river guides.

The eastern slopes

A way east of Nilsomar the land rises into a sequence of hills and mountains running roughly north to south. There are passes through, but little contact with whatever lands might lie on the other side. Some areas are geologically active, with quakes, geysers and noxious gases but rarely a full eruption.

The cliffs and ridges themselves are largely deserted, but one might occasionally find entrances to long-forgotten halls or tombs, or encounter undermen on an expedition to the surface or barbaric ogres seeking flesh.

The easternmost town is **Narrowhome**, a crossroads that began as a shanty town within a network of ravines in the cracked plains and has expanded more than improved. It's a crowded, dusty place with shops and dwellings stacked atop each other, made of a combination of caves and rickety walkways.

URGES

This world is shaped by six forces or energies known as the Urges, or sometimes as the Six Serpents for the way they're usually depicted. They relate in a cycle of domination or destruction: Fire conquers Metal; Metal conquers Wood; Wood conquers Earth; Earth conquers Wind; Wind conquers Water; Water conquers Fire. Each Urge is connected to certain physical things, principles, faculties, virtues and vices. In general, any action a person performs can be seen as primarily related to one Urge (though sometimes the determination is difficult).

Fire
Joy, Passion, Temper, Restlessness
Light, energy, predatory beasts
Presence
Action
Red

Metal
Determination, Self-reliance, Sorrow, Inflexibility
Constructed things
Resilience
Organisation
White

Water
Wisdom, Nurture, Fear, Indecision
Liquids, Cold, Water creatures
Intuition
Support
Black

Wood
Green
Growth
Sensuality
Living and growing things
Flexibility, Generosity, Anger, Lust

Wind
Blue
Change
Reason
Vapours, Flying creatures
Freedom, Curiosity, Inconstancy

Earth
Grey
Stability
Practicality
Minerals, Burrowing creatures
Patience, Responsibility, Selfishness, Greed

In addition to the Six there is another, separate but similar, force known as **Dark Urge**, connected to the Dark Below, its inhabitants, and corruption and destruction. Most people see it as something to avoid.

Urges Within

People (and possibly other beings) contain Urge energies too. For most they're in balance at a low level, but in some people particular ones are stronger, and sometimes they can channel that energy into great feats. The Urges form a set of Qualities, which are normally Average and therefore invisible but may be specified as Strengths or Weaknesses.

Player characters are more likely than most to have these. Some Peoples are associated with particular Urges, and you can also buy them with your Open Quality Ranks. There's a restriction: you can't have Strengths in different Urges with a conflict relationship, i.e. those directly before or after in the sequence (which means you can't have more than three, and only certain combinations).

For powering sorcery the individual's Urge Rank dictates how much power they can provide, with the Urge Quality downshifted each time a Rank is drawn. Someone with no Quality recorded for that Urge can be assumed to be Average, and therefore good for one Rank before hitting the bottom of the barrel at Poor. As stated before, in most cases the only way to get this out of another person is by killing them.

Using Urge Qualities

If you have a specified Urge Strength you can draw on it to get +1d6 for an action related to that Urge, but each use Downshifts the Urge for the rest of the scene; once it's at Poor no further uses are possible. So the higher your Rank, the more times you can use it within a short period of time. A Poor [-2] rated Urge could mean that you're deficient in that energy or have trouble controlling it.

Example. Katrin is facing some slavers who want to catch her in a net. She has Good [+2] Wind Urge - one of the listed correspondences is Freedom, and the GM agrees that it fits with avoiding ensnaring bonds. Katrin's player downshifts the Urge Quality to Average and adds 1d6 to the roll.

Urges Without

The physical world can provide sources of Urge energy, mainly of interest to sorcerers who are able to tap it. Some **locations** have Urge Quality Ranks - usually rated between Good and Poor. For instance if you're on a ship at sea you'd be safe assuming there's Good [+2] Water Urge. Certain **objects** have absorbed the energy enough to have a rating. As mentioned in the *Magic* section, draining too much can have an effect on the environment.

Urge items

It is possible to have an object with an Urge Quality, representing a pool of energy that can be drawn upon to do appropriate things. For the most part these are only of interest to sorcerers and others who know how to work with these forces.

- Urge items can be created by modern sorcery, but they cannot regenerate Urge, only hold it until used. There is a rite that draws Urge from the surroundings and stores it in an object. This works like a normal use of sorcery, with the Intensity being the amount transferred (up to the Rank available).

- Naturally occurring Urge items, created by exposure to those energies, are rare and sought after.

- Ancient relics from when such things were understood better are also valuable, and may have properties that cannot be duplicated today - for instance enabling the person holding or wearing the item to channel that energy as it were a personal, renewable Urge Quality.

INTERCESSORS

These individuals, with their distinctive grey robes and staffs, may be found wandering through any of the lands. They are, more or less, priests of the spirits of the Worthy Ancestors. They convey the will of the Ancestors about how people should live, give blessings in their name and do what they can to improve the well-being of the people. Colloquially they're often referred to as Bone Priests.

Intercessors believe that the only way to calm the lands and get the Urges to work in harmony is for the collective of Good Spirits to become strong enough – which means they have a vested interest in good people becoming dead, at the same time as a desire to help them.

Rather than having a very structured organisation they act as a community that polices itself. Of course, being human, members of the order can take all sorts of turns. Most maintain an attitude of respect toward the spirits and only call them in genuine need, but there have been some who've used their power to compel spirits, dominate or harm people, and create walking corpses to serve them.

Intercessor abilities

They have a decent general education, including writing and medicine, and may have further knowledge skills. They might have a Charm or two. Their key supernatural ability, however, is **Intercession***. This allows them to act as a conduit to allow a Good Spirit to enter the physical world for a time, through a living host or a dead body in good condition. Of course this means that its strength has been taken away from the spirit plane, so the Intercessor will probably not keep it for long - though sometimes they carry one or two permanent helpers, usually in bones. (Most Intercessors form relationships with one or two particular spirits they call often, and carry connecting items among their meagre possessions.)
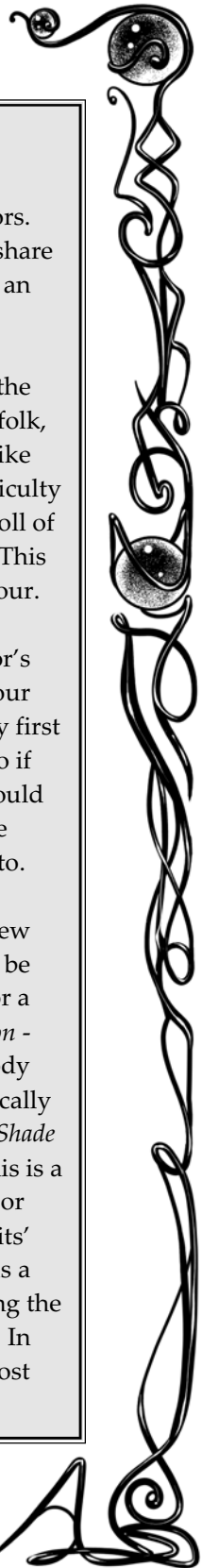
Intercession*

This is the ability to contact the spirits of the Worthy Ancestors. Typical uses are letting a spirit speak through the Intercessor to share knowledge it had in life, e.g. of past events, and drawing on an Ancestor's skills to aid in tasks.

Bringing a spirit through requires a roll. Difficulty is based on the power and significance of the spirit - Average for ordinary local folk, higher for legendary heroes. This assumes you have some link, like the individual's body or a favourite place or possession, and difficulty is upshifted if you don't. There's a degree of risk: failing with a roll of doubles gets something malicious from the Dark Below instead. This might not be obvious straight away if it's canny about its behaviour.

Spirit Qualities. Your Rank dictates how much of the Ancestor's nature gets manifested. It has a number of Qualities equal to your MOD (1 for Average), ranked at Good [+2]. The ones you identify first should be core occupation and most distinctive characteristics. So if you call up a mighty warrior with Good [+2] Intercession* you could specify Warrior and Strong. The spirit can then provide these Qualities to assist its host or the holder of its vessel, if it chooses to.

Vessels. A spirit can speak or act through the Intercessor for a few moments, but if it is to stay longer in the physical world it must be bound into a dead body part (usually a bone), an entire corpse, or a living animal or person. For this to work there must be *Connection* - something that ties that spirit to that host. Parts of its former body would work, as would a living descendant or an animal symbolically connected to the spirit's nature. Intercessor lore also talks about *Shade* - some bindings are Light and others Dark and to be avoided. This is a matter of judgment, based on whether it will bring physical or spiritual harm to the vessel or other people or hinder the Spirits' struggle. The binding can be ended by use of Intercession* (needs a contest to beat someone else's binding), or by destroying or killing the vessel. In animal vessels the spirit usually takes direct control. In people it can only do so if it defeats the vessel's will, which most would not want to do, but the person can allow it to manifest.

PEOPLES

Everyone is from somewhere. For *Jaws* that's described in terms of the character's People rather than a nation-state. The world of the Six Serpents is less structured than many settings, and cultural groups don't always form the trappings of countries - they often just have territories where they get by as best they can.

So, you must record the People you choose on your character sheet as a note for the future. Below are listed some of the common groups in the setting. Each has a short **description**, followed by a list of a few **Qualities** common to that folk. When making the character, you must take at least one Rank in one of those Strengths - this is your only mandatory tie to the culture of your birth, though of course you're free to take some of the others too. There's a brief note at the end of each write-up to give a pointer for the sort of **name** characters from that people are likely to have. This is very much a guideline: if you have a good name that doesn't clash horribly, use it!

If you like, players and GM might work together to create **new Peoples** that will fit in somewhere. All you need is an interesting idea, a short description and a handful of Qualities.

Non-human races. In the standard *Jaws* setting (and sword-and-sorcery in general) there are no elves, dwarves and the like - just different variants of human stock. However, each of those groups has its own culture, strengths and weaknesses. Some carry peculiar traits from their people's ancient heritage, or are particularly adapted to their environment.

People as a Quality. If you wish you can also take the People as one of your Open Qualities, to indicate that being of that People is important to the character - then you'll do better at appropriate knowledge and social tasks, and will be able to generate Story Hooks from it. On the other hand, characters might leave their origins far behind and never give them a second thought.

Devilfolk of Ahaan

On the edge of the great crater of the Empty Cup stands the ancient half-shattered city of Ahaan - one side blasted and scarred by whatever forces scoured the land long ago, the other side clinging on in mysterious testament to the civilisation of an earlier age, its towers and vaults pressed into service or abandoned to wind and shadow.

Among these streets pass a strange folk with cats' eyes, tall and robed and close-lipped. The open rumour is that they are partially descended from things of the Dark Below, a result of the sorcerous practices of their long-ago ancestors. To outsiders they are, for the most part, polite but somewhat aloof, contending in private with their split nature. Certainly there is sorcery here, and sometimes talk of strange ceremonies and
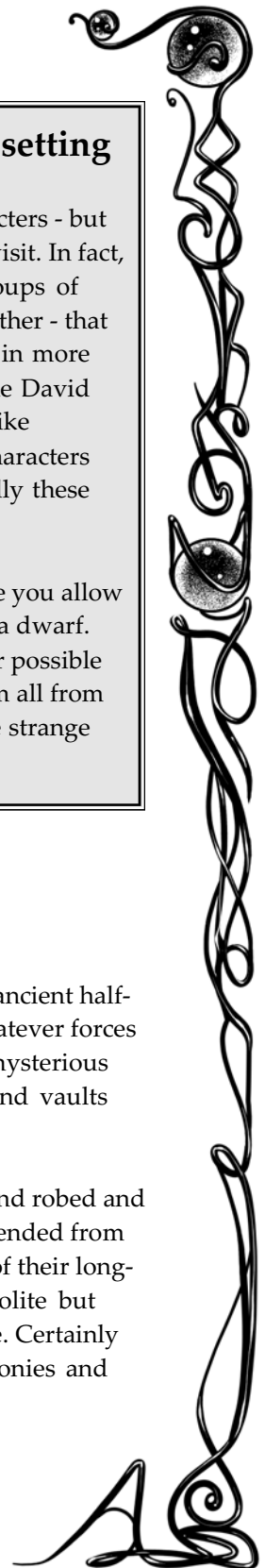
sightings of darksome creatures. Traders and travellers from other lands prefer to stick together around Strangers' Square and the nearby streets.

Strengths: Night Vision, Arcane Lore, Dark Urge, Mysterious

Weaknesses: Vulnerable to Temptation, Outsider

Other: Sorcery* is absolutely available. Charms are possible, but beyond one or two you should really take Sorcery* instead. Urges are possible, though not Fire or Wood, and none may exceed their Dark Urge Rank.

Names: Either exotic or short, giving nothing away; as if they could have come down from long ago. Kale, Arazin, Mistelhan, Persis.

Witchfolk of Belimaur

They are known for their interest in magic, and most can cast at least one or two small spells. They collect Charms, aiming ever to increase their people's store of magical knowledge. Some of them go questing far and wide to uncover or trade for new ones. However, most avoid sorcery, feeling that it is too dangerous and practitioners are too hard for society to control. (Of course, it's fairly common for individuals to be tempted to the sorcerous path by the promise of greater power, and then might have to be dealt with one way or another.)

They call themselves Belimaurans, and barely tolerate the common terms "witch-man" and "witch-woman". Most are dark-haired and quick-eyed. Their outfits have many folds of cloth, with turbans or headscarves, and both men and women tend to adorn themselves with jewellery and trinkets (any piece of which might conceal a spell ready to use). They are known to wander far from their homeland as travelling traders or diplomats, often travelling in painted caravans. A loyal Belimauran can be a most useful advisor for a lord or prince.

Strengths: Intelligent, Perceptive, Secretive, Trader, Traveller

Weaknesses: Curiosity

Other: This background allows open Quality Ranks to be spent on Charm* (specify) and Charmcraft*. Their most common Urges are Fire and Wind.

Names: With something of an Eastern European vibe: Matteya, Janos, Turpik, Catalina.

The Earth Tribes of Kalet

In the north-west lie the Kalet Lands, occupied by the people of that name, who also refer to themselves as the Tribes of the Earth. Clan groups live in steads amongst the moors and valleys, herding cattle and other livestock and cutting peat for fuel, and worshipping the earth goddess Hursa. They are bold but undisciplined warriors, and often mount raids on other clans to carry off goods and prove their mettle.

The hallmarks of the Kalet people are a great vitality, whether expressed in battle or speech (they produce great musicians and storytellers), and a feeling of connection to nature and interest in using its gifts. Those who lean towards learning often pick up a low level of Alchemy* based around herbs and other natural ingredients. Earth-Priests of Hursa may have a naturalistic Charm or two - or even, in rare cases, become sorcerers of earth magic.
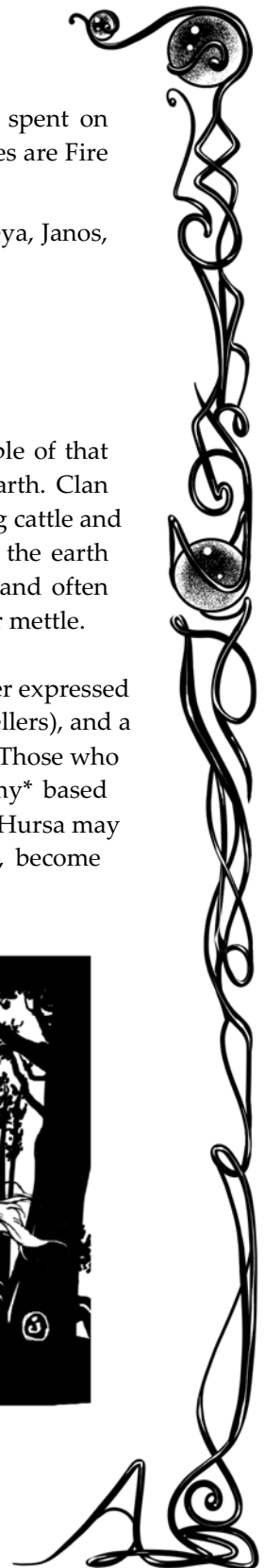
Strengths: Wood Urge, Warrior, Oratory, Alchemy*

Weaknesses: Impulsive, Uncivilised

Other: The Urges of Earth and Fire are also relatively common.

Names: With a Scottish/Irish feel, maybe a bit Scandinavian in some villages. Connor, Darmid, Maeve, Brigit.

Cliff People of Narrowhome

The town of Narrowhome was founded by exiles from other lands. They built a shanty inside fissures in the rock and tapped into lava flows and steam vents for energy. It has grown into a dynamic but ramshackle trading town that sprawls through a network of chasms, continually adapting to changes in the landscape. It is noisy, chaotic and dusty, though it does have its own rules that enable the town to survive. (For instance, a fair bit of crime goes on. Theft of luxury items will not motivate the Guard overmuch, but depriving someone of water or shelter is taboo and will be treated very seriously.)

The inhabitants are a varied lot, mixed from many different Peoples over a long period. They live in cave-homes dug into cliff faces that are criss-crossed by vertical "streets" of ladders, platforms, etc. Major workshops and places to trade with outsiders are at ground level. The guards are quick to react to possible threats from the surrounding landscape, like giant scorpions and unnatural travellers.

Strengths: Improvising, Climbing, Bargaining, Streetwise

Weaknesses: Pushy, Scruffy

Other: Urges occur with average frequency. The most common are Earth and Wind.

Names: Any possible as they're such a mixed lot.

Masked Folk of Nilsomar

The City of a Thousand Delights, one of the largest in the lands, is located on a natural bay off the Sea of the Moon at the shoulder of the southern peninsula. It's a place of minarets and domes, tented markets, white-walled houses and strange scents on the breeze.

The people are brown-skinned and inscrutable, giving away little of their true thought through face or speech, although they partake enthusiastically in entertainments and diversions. Traditionally, masks are worn on formal occasions - people whose roles are tied up with formality, status and etiquette, like courtiers, often wear them all the time in public. Fashion and decoration tend toward brightly coloured silks and gauzes. Various powders and fumes are favoured for recreational purposes. Cats are common pets.

They revere the moon, and the goddess Selné who's a representation of it. She is seen as benevolent but capricious; usually shown as a young woman in a dance of many veils, the tales tell that removing one veil too many leads to madness.

Strengths: Inscrutable, Misdirection, Trade, an art or performance skill, Alchemy*

Weaknesses: Civilised

Other: Urges occur with average frequency. The most common are Water, Fire and Wood. Sorcery and Charms are also found with average frequency.

Names: A mixture of Indian and Arabian in feel. Omar, Anjisthira, Shahavi, Nieva.

Water People of Quegin

The Quegin Islands in the wide estuary of the mighty Blackworm River are an irregular group of small clumps of land inhabited by a tribal folk who make their living on and in the water. Many of them have the ability
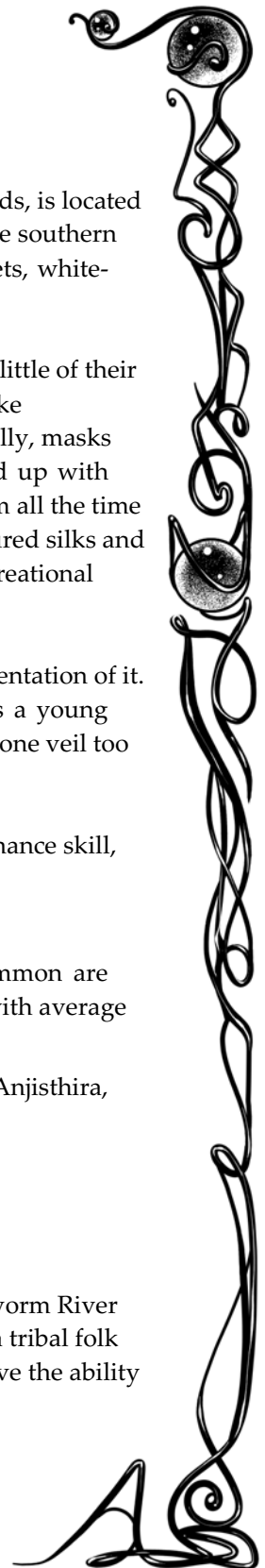
to hold their breath for ten or fifteen minutes at a time, and long, webbed fingers and toes that help with swimming.

The islands themselves are sand and soil with scrubby undergrowth and clumps of richer vegetation. If one dives below the waterline one can see their foundations of mud and coral; and, going deeper, realise that these have accreted on the uppermost spires and towers of an ancient submerged city. The Quegin do not often speak of this with outsiders, but will certainly try to dissuade them from venturing down there, for unnamed things lurk in the crypts and cloisters. It is a rite of passage for young Quegin warriors to swim into the depths and return with some trinket or artefact. Some quite peculiar items can come back into the light in this way.

Strengths: Semi-aquatic*, Swimming, Boating, Water Urge

Weaknesses: Uncivilised, Vulnerable to Dehydration (from dry heat)

Other: They don't have much truck with magic. Shamans typically have modest levels of Divination*, receiving visions that they claim to be from their strange gods, and maybe a couple of Charms.

Names: Use-names that outsiders will hear, at least, tend to be made from things and events in the natural environment that strike the parents or the person as a young adult. Shining Cloud, Empty Boat (a mysterious and , some would say, inauspicious choice), Starkeeper, Shark Eye.

Freemen of the River Towns

For much of the central region the great Blackworm River is like a backbone, carrying goods and people from one land to another. The linchpins of this are the River Towns of Halyn, Piscay and Amoset dotted along its banks, acting as a loose trading league. They are settlements of only medium size, but draw in many crafters and traders who want to operate in a stable environment, supported by river fishing and produce from the surrounding farmsteads. Each has a good harbour, and sturdy walls on the landward sides.
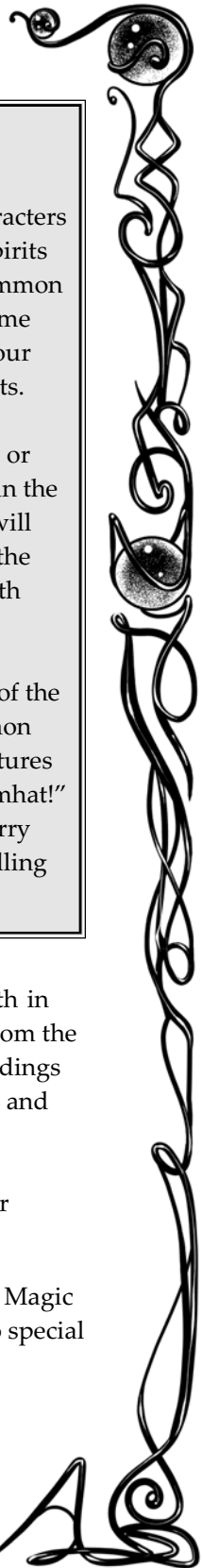
Oaths

A standard bit of colour in sword and sorcery is to have the characters swear frequent oaths in the names of gods, demons, powerful spirits or whatever. You can come up with these pretty easily using common formats like, "By ...!" or, "In the name of ...!" or working in some attribute of the entity in question. Decide whether the style of your game suits going as far as reference to personal anatomy or habits.

In most places you might hear people call on the Good Spirits or Worthy Ancestors (more or less interchangeably) - for instance in the River Towns you'll get, "Good Spirits preserve us!" The Kalets will use, "Hursa!" or "By Hursa!" In Nilsomar you might get, "by the sacred moon!" or "Selné's veils!" Sartain is more prosaic, with exclamations involving damnation and bastardry.

The Ahaans, when sufficiently provoked, tend to refer to devils of the Dark little known to outsiders - but one common one is the demon Zhe'mhat (*jer-mart*, roughly), also known among some other cultures and spread elsewhere by bold and profane types. "Eyes of Zhe'mhat!" or "Wings of Zhe'mhat!" are common examples. Folk who worry about their reputations or are superstitious will tend to avoid calling on such names.

The inhabitants tend to be steady and practical, putting their faith in sturdy, well-made structures and articles. Weapons and armour from the River Towns are among the best available. They like their surroundings to be orderly, and the Town Watches are well staffed, trained and equipped.

Strengths: Steady, Practical, Craft (specify), Trader, Boating, Fisher

Weaknesses: Inflexible, Unimaginative, Civilised

Other: The Urges of Earth and Metal are by far the most common. Magic is rare, and frowned upon. Master crafters might know one or two special "craft secrets" that are actually Charms.

Names: Quite English-sounding, though possibly a bit medieval or Biblical-sounding, with a definite first name and surname. The latter often relates to a profession that was followed somewhere in the family line, though it could relate to a place or something else. Simeon Archer, Bertram Greenglade, Sophia Silverwright, Mary Limner.

Citizens of Sartain

The Jewel of the Western Coast, Sartain (sar-tayn') is one of the few large cities in this world. Its surroundings are on the warm edge of temperate, with a mixture of wild forest and cultivated fields leading inland. The buildings are mostly practical but elegant, with a fondness for towers and the occasional baroque extravagance.

Society is characterised by the split between two classes. The ordinary citizens follow the same range of professions as one might find anywhere, from sailor and carpenter to courtesan and cutpurse, with a robust make-do attitude and an eye for opportunity. There are certainly areas where the blacker industries thrive, and in most neighbourhoods a stranger walking alone at night is not entirely safe. The nobles are, for the most part, fixated on all things fine - artworks, clothing, food and drink, and so on - and use this as the mark of self-worth and social status. Some of them are ineffectual fops, but it is standard for the males, at least, to learn skills like fencing and riding so some can be quite capable. Many of them keep busy intriguing against each other for power and wealth.

Strengths: Streetwise, Profession (specify), Connoisseur, Intrigue

Weaknesses: Civilised, Unprincipled, Vain

Other: Urges aren't common at all - limit them to low Ranks. It can be any type, but especially Metal. A few noble bloodlines are more attuned.

Names: Something of an air of historic Europe, especially France. Jermaine, Matthias, Beata, Jirel. Nobles are concerned about their family name, but ordinary folk often aren't especially bothered with one.

Owl-men of Temisarum

In the humid forest of the south lies ancient Temisarum, the Citadel of the Moon, its broken marble columns and ruined temples now largely reclaimed by vegetation and prowled by dangerous beasts. In camps on intact roofs and in fortified squares live the Temisarans, a tall, lean, pale-skinned folk whose culture has made the peculiar adaptation to being active at night and resting during the day. It's not clear whether this originally derived from the heat of the environment, meeting nocturnal predators on their own terms or just some whim of the Ancients. Their ability to see at night has earned them the name "Owl-men" among outsiders.

They are excellent hunters with a keen awareness of their territory. Some places are best avoided, and some - like the interiors of certain buildings - are actually taboo. (Some visitors have discovered, too late, that there's often good reason for this.) Though outwardly primitive, they maintain a good base of crafts and are capable of urbane debate, though they lack a little in humour. Their beliefs revolve around a group of patron spirits like Seleya the Night Wind, Grandfather Jaguar and the Boneface Watchers; and some among them know spirit Charms connected to these. Their Wise Ones are likely to know several, plus Charmcraft* to prepare talismans for the tribe and possibly a bit of Alchemy*. The Temisarans find the Worthy Ancestors cult fits quite well alongside their own, and well-mannered Intercessors are welcome here (though it will be suggested that they be careful when opening the ways in the city).

Strengths: Nocturnal, Keen Senses, Stealth, Hunter, Spirit Lore

Weaknesses: Sensitive to Light

Other: The most common Urges are Water and Metal.

Names: Most are fairly long, three or four syllables, with 'e' and 'i' common vowels. Some individuals come to be known by a nickname or title. Alemontaros, Firapelin, Memelosa, Crane Gatherer.
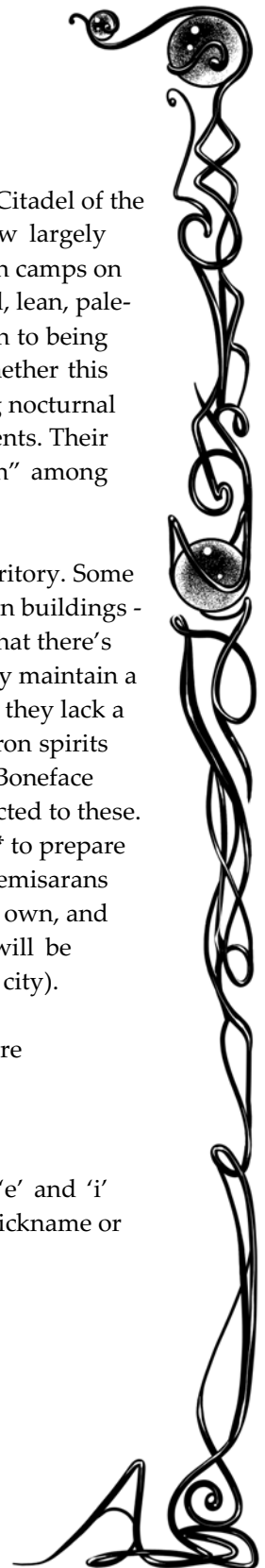
MONSTERS

Some fantasy styles have creatures of all shapes and sizes lurking in every tree, with characters routinely assailed by groups of them. In the sword and sorcery end of the pool, however, monsters are *special*. There might be a single one in a story, provoking much fear and posing a real challenge to overcome. That's in addition to ordinary wild and domestic creatures, of course, which are often the same as those of our own world but need not be. Dark fantasy tales can be heavier on the monsters, with an emphasis on the frightening and unnatural.

So an extensive list of monsters - like a dating agency but with more gore - is less useful here than in other fantasy styles. The characters might meet certain creature types on repeated occasions, but you should try to make each *Monster* different from those that have gone before. So there's a fair bit of material here on constructing them, and a few examples of the different types.

"Monsters" usually fall into these brackets:

- **Strange Peoples** - intelligent races sufficiently different in nature or habits to not count as entirely human. (In the *Jaws* setting they're generally descended from humans who were altered long ago.)

- **Fierce Beasts** - animals that probably want to eat your head. They might be far larger and more dangerous than those in the real world - as a natural strain, a freakish individual or the subject of sorcery - but they're still basically natural animals.

- **The Unquiet Dead** - from ghosts tied to the unfinished deeds of life to walking corpses created by sorcery. These are not as common as in many other fantasy styles.

- **Things from the Dark** - creatures that should not exist in the world, usually summoned by sorcery from the Dark Below. They can have pretty much any form or ability, and minds beyond human ken.
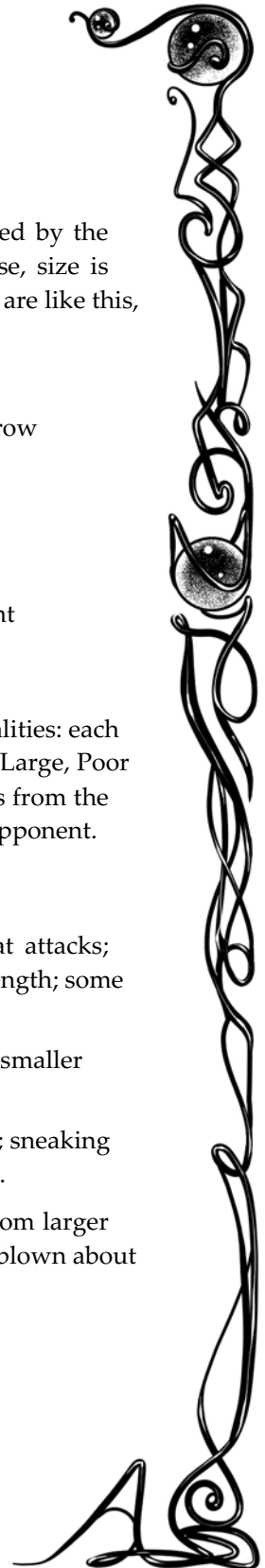
Size

This is possibly the most significant creature feature, defined by the Qualities **Large** and **Small**. (If neither is specified, of course, size is Average - that is, roughly the same as a human.) Their levels are like this, extending away from human size in both directions:

- Master Small – humanoid up to an inch tall, insect

- Expert Small – humanoid a few inches tall, mouse, sparrow

- Good Small – humanoid 2-3ft tall, dog, cat

- Average – human-sized

- Good Large – humanoid around 10ft tall, horse, bear

- Expert Large– humanoid around 30ft tall, rhino, elephant

- Master Large – humanoid around 100ft tall, whale

These are brackets; use the closest level. They are **paired** Qualities: each comes with an associated Weakness, for instance Expert [+4] Large, Poor [-2] Large. The Weakness activates in different circumstances from the Strength. In some cases this depends on the size level of an opponent.

Here are some of the main applications.

- **Large size is good for:** making powerful close combat attacks; resisting damage from close combat attacks; feats of strength; some tasks requiring reach.

- **Large size is bad for:** avoiding ranged attacks from smaller opponents; sneaking around; crossing fragile surfaces.

- **Small size is good for:** not getting hit by ranged attacks; sneaking around and staying unnoticed; getting into small spaces.

- **Small size is bad for:** resisting close combat damage from larger opponents; feats of strength; resisting forces (like being blown about by the wind); tasks requiring reach.

Notes on size

Size in combat. In PDQ, unlike many other RPGs, an attack includes both the accuracy of a strike and its damaging power, and a defence includes both the ability to not get hit and the fortitude to soak up damage. However, conventional wisdom says that a large creature is easier to hit but harder to hurt, while a smaller creature is harder to hit but more fragile. So to make size play an interesting part in physical combat we have to come up with some guidelines, and these are reflected in the previous paragraphs about what Small and Large are good for.

- In hand-to-hand combat power is more important.

- In ranged combat accuracy is more important.

- Optional rule - an attacker more than one size level smaller than the defender does Failure Ranks, not Damage Ranks - it cannot do any lasting harm.

Size "reduction". In conflicts the effective rank of a creature's size may change due to damage or downshifting. Of course the creature doesn't actually change size: it's more a case of its size becoming a less important feature of the story. When comparing two creatures' sizes (for instance to see whether a Weakness kicks in) always look at the permanent Ranks.

Type

Natural animals and some supernatural monsters fit into a certain ecological role. The following can be used as a variant on professional Qualities. Using this and size together gives a basic creature definition to fine-tune with special abilities. (Try to fit a beast into a single category if you can, but if necessary you could give it two, probably at lower levels, or invent a slightly different Quality that fits better.)

- **Grazer** – uses include running, hiding and dodging.

- **Scavenger** – uses include foraging, resisting harm and adaptability.

- **Predator** – uses include attacking, chasing and ferocity.

Other common Qualities

Here's a list of common Qualities found among beasts and monsters. Asterisks denote supernatural Qualities.

Amorphous - basic physical make-up is less solid and fixed in shape than most Earthly life. It can contort and fit through small gaps, and MOD resists injury from physical blows (but not fire, cold or other energies).

Amphibious - able to operate normally in both air and water. MOD would count for actions like swimming.

**Armour** - straightforward MOD protection against physical injury.

Aversion (specify)* - with this Weakness something (e.g. fire, iron, garlic) is inimical to the creature. It can *repulse*, penalising the creature with the Poor [-2] MOD in active attempts to drive it back. In attacks it causes *damage*, bypassing any supernatural defences and applying the [-2] MOD to resistance. Deliberately touching an aversion object gives 1 Damage Rank.

Blood Hunger - with this Weakness a creature with *Energy Drain** that has no points in its energy pool is beset by hunger, becoming obsessed by the blood in those around it and suffering the [-2] if it needs to resist feeding. The energy pool reduces by 1 point per scene, or thereabouts; they can't go more than a day or two without a snack. Whether they *want* to resist depends on individuals; many enjoy hunting whenever they can.

Camouflage - MOD adds to stealth due to some feature of its appearance. This might only work in specific situations, such as a particular environment or when stationary.

Claws, Teeth, Stinger, etc – some nasty sharp or pointy appendage(s) that can add MOD to attacks; Rank reflects degree of nastiness.

Darksense – the ability to get around without any light at all. The assumption is that it gives something kind of like a visual image, even if
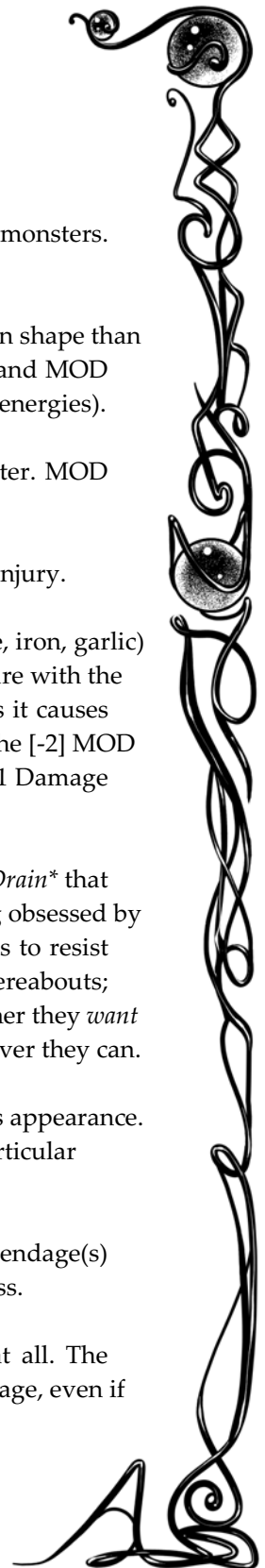
it works by ultrasound or heat detection or just plain magic, though this is probably less detailed than ordinary sight.

Damage Resistance* - increased resilience against all types of mundane physical harm, adding MOD to a wide spectrum of rolls. It's occasionally found in creatures from the Dark. It is bypassed by direct magical effects (including enchanted objects but not physical phenomena conjured by magic) and sometimes other specific substances or influences.

Dead* – found in creatures like walking corpses, acts as Arcane Resistance* (adds TN, not MOD) against various kinds of effect that really only work on living subjects, including death magic, life drain, most poisons and diseases, sleep and pain. The MOD can be used to oppose straightforward physical trauma.

(Terrain) Dweller - many creatures are particularly adapted to their environment and skilled in surviving there. This Quality is specified especially when that habitat has difficult conditions. Possible versions include Desert Dweller, Jungle Dweller, Ice Dweller, Ocean Dweller. It covers both the skills to find food, shelter, etc. and resistance to environmental hazards like the heat of the desert. It's most commonly used for natural animals, as an aid to quick-and-dirty descriptions (size, type, habitat), often at Good Rank; less commonly for supernatural monsters (but you could use it for any character, with variants like City Dweller). Of course you can choose to specify separate Qualities instead (or as well if it's particularly good at one aspect).

Energy Drain* – this can take various forms, like a chilling touch or blood drain. The victim takes damage in the usual way, and the user recovers that same number of Ranks of damage (Failure first). If the user hasn't lost that many Ranks, the surplus goes into a pool of up to 10 points that can be spent to give Upshifts (one per action).

Enhanced Sense (specify) – gives an unusual sense (see Darksense above), or one that covers an unusual range (hearing ultrasonics), or one that's unusually sensitive (tracking by scent). Give it a name to reflect what it does. This works like any other Quality, but some versions might allow rolls that can't normally be attempted. Sometimes sense Qualities stack up, like Keen Senses, Good Eyesight and Distance Vision.

Flight – the ability to move through the air, with or without wings. Rank gives speed and manoeuvrability.

Incorporeal* – lacking physical substance, like ghosts. It acts as Arcane Resistance* against all ordinary physical attacks. It doesn't work against direct effects of magic (as opposed to physical effects produced by it). Against physical attacks carrying a magical charge (enchanted swords etc.) it just uses MOD. Incorporeal creatures can't make ordinary physical attacks, but often have some ability like *Energy Drain* - Chilling Touch* that does damage on an apparent physical attack. They can pass through solid objects, are untroubled by gravity and don't need to breathe. The MOD can be added to some tasks, notably stealth.

Magic Resistance* - adds MOD to resist the effects of any magic cast directly on the creature. It doesn't work against indirect effects, e.g. physical phenomena created by magic like gouts of flame.

Night Vision - the ability to see normally in low light conditions, though not total darkness.

Pack Hunter - adds on to aggression, courage, initiative and tactics when the creature attacks in a group of at least three.

Plant - this is a bit out there, but who knows what one might find in strangely lit caverns beneath the earth? Pain and trauma don't affect it as they would an animal. MOD resists physical blows, but not heat or cold. Resists effects designed specifically for animal life with its TN - e.g. poison, sleep, mind control, magic affecting the body.

Poison – there are many types. In most cases poison effects can only be healed within the scene by an agency targeted specifically at poisons, e.g. a Cure Poison charm or potion. The effect of a poison lasts "a while",
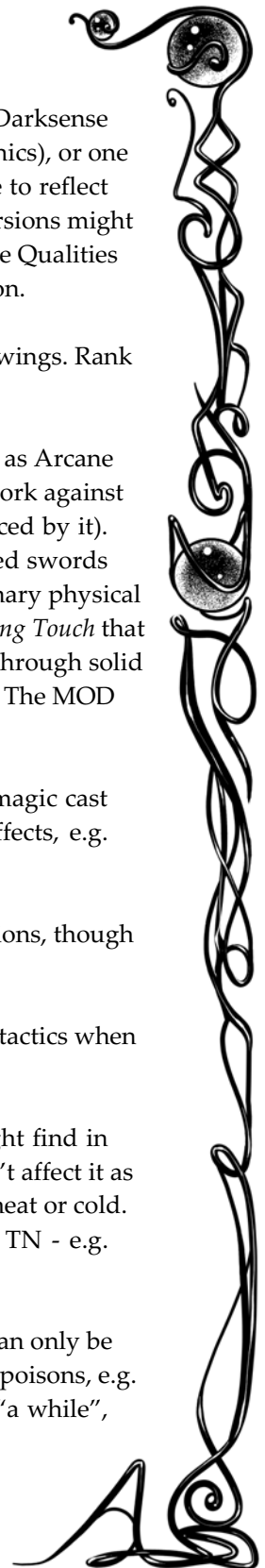
which will often count as continuing danger for healing purposes for the next scene or two. The onset period of fantasy poisons is usually "turn" (after everyone's acted) or "scene" (end of this or early in next).

- Damage poisons - just does another lot of straightforward damage, TN opposed by toughness.

- Faculty poisons - do "targeted damage" to a particular kind of faculty, applying damage Ranks to any Qualities of that type first and then, if any are left over, inflicting a suitable temporary Weakness. A "strength" one might do all its damage to Strength, Built Like a Brick Outhouse and such, while a "perception" one could damage Acute Hearing or Night Vision.

- Condition poisons - resist the poison's TN or suffer some condition, e.g. paralysis or blindness.

Regeneration – in a physical conflict situation the creature heals very rapidly, regaining MOD damage ranks at the end of each round (Average counts as 1). There are often certain types of harm the regeneration can't heal, for instance fire. (If you want to deal with such a creature in a complicated situation, just add this to the defence and describe accordingly.)

Resistance (specify) – near-immunity to one particular type of harm, like heat, cold or poison. Ordinary "background" occurrences of the harm won't bother the creature at all. Against those produced by key characters it adds its Target Number to resistance rather than its MOD, and if any damage *is* taken it's as Failure Ranks.

Shocking Appearance - when the creature is first encountered this Rank must be resisted with a roll on mental fortitude Qualities, taking the difference as Failure Ranks or, in exceptional cases, Damage Ranks. Creatures from the Dark Below usually have this property.

Swarm - when a large group of small creatures acts as a single unit it becomes a greater threat. Qualities are those of the individual, but Swarm replaces size (it can be Average). It's based on weight of numbers, good for resisting *all* physical attacks and for splitting attacks. It's often a good idea to run a swarm as a conflict situation to reflect gradually whittling it down.

Strange Peoples

Ogres

There aren't many ogres left, and most people are happy with that. Bred by the ancients for battle or labour, they stand around 7 feet tall and have great strength, toughness and ferocity. They are also primitive and brutal, and regard people as food. They can be found in most regions, singly or in small groups, but mainly in the eastern mountains and northern forests. There are a few dubious tales of strong men who are "half-ogres".

Strengths: Expert [+4] Strong, Expert [+4] Tough, Expert [+4] Fierce, Expert [+4] Outdoor Survival, Good [+2] Hunter

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Dull-witted, Poor [-2] Hot-tempered

Undermen

Dotted across the lands are cave mouths and crevasses that open into the Underfields, networks of tunnels and caverns that, if rumour is to be believed, connect into one huge system if one ventures deep enough. What is certain is that they are inhabited by the Undermen, a race adapted for underground life.

A typical individual is about 5 feet tall, pale-skinned and hairless, clad in some brief hide or skin. A single one is no great threat, but they tend to appear in small groups. Some few know a small number of Charms, possibly learned through the cult of some dark god. Undermen are indifferent or hostile to surface-dwellers, and there are many reports of people being dragged away and never seen again.

Strengths: Good [+2] Earth Urge, Good [+2] Underground Dweller, Average [0] Darksense, Good [+2] Resilient, Good [+2] Hunter (or possibly other occupation)

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Vulnerable to light, Poor [-2] Uncivilised
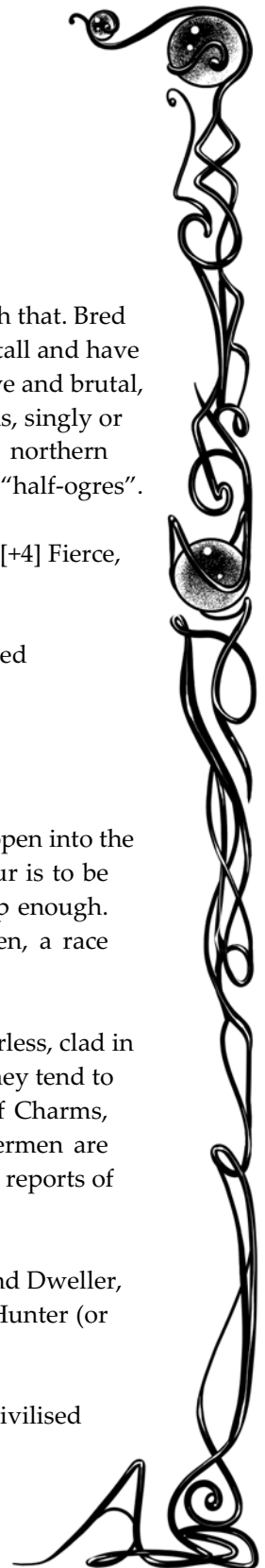
Fierce Beasts

The most common non-human opponent in the sword and sorcery side of fantasy is an animal. If this sounds unimpressive, we should note the tendency for such beasts to be somewhat larger and certainly more aggressive than their real-world equivalents. There are also instances of beasts that are *much* bigger and more dangerous than normal; possibly smarter too. These might be a giant species, or a highly unusual individual. (You can reflect this by giving an extra level of size and/or Qualities like Strong, Tough and Fierce.)

Ape, Giant

These creatures from the forests of the south are like a gorilla, but larger and more aggressive. Their hair is black, brown or grey. They have a degree of intelligence, but this tends to get drowned out by hostility. Some rare specimens grow up to Good [+2] Large.

Strengths: Master [+6] Strong, Expert [+4] Tough, Expert [+4] Fierce, Good [+2] Forest Dweller, Good [+2] Keen Senses, Good [+2] Climbing

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Hot-tempered

Bear

This is the brown bear, found high up the food chain in hills and forests anywhere but the south. General advice is to stay away, as they are ill-tempered, territorial and quick to react to perceived threats.

Strengths: Good [+2] Large, Good [+2] Scavenger, Good [+2] Predator, Expert [+4] Strong, Good [+2] Tough, Good [+2] Dangerous When Roused

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Large

Lion

These are the largest and most impressive of the big cats, found in the plains of the south.

Strengths: Expert [+4] Predator, Good [+2] Strong, Good [+2] Tough, Good [+2] Athletic, Good [+2] Claws and Teeth, Good [+2] Night Vision, Good [+2] Keen Senses, Good [+2] Intimidating Roar

Weaknesses: none

A seriously big male lion could have Good [+2] Large, Poor [-2] Large. Females in a pride might have slightly toned down stats, but would also have a bit of Pack Hunting.

Other big cats have variations on these Qualities - for instance the leopards of the southern peninsula have less power and more stealth and agility.

Rat swarm

These rodents can be found almost everywhere. They might not be big or strong, but they're smart, adaptable and resilient. (Adapt the Swarm size Rank to suit. Individually they have the same stats but Expert [+4] Small and Poor [-2] Small.)

Strengths: Good [+2] Swarm, Expert [+4] Scavenger, Good [+2] Gnawing, Good [+2] Sensitive Smell, Good [+2] Resist Poison and Disease

Weaknesses: none
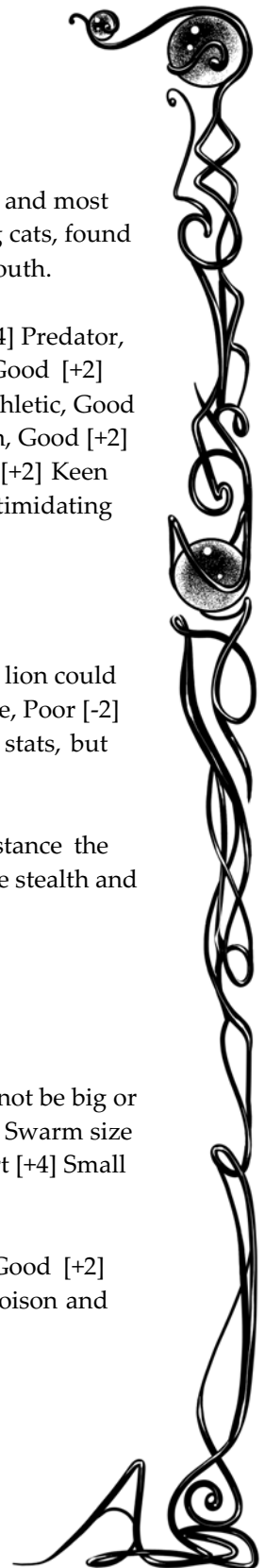
Scorpion, Giant

These are man-sized to horse-sized and willing to attack almost anything. They can adapt to almost any terrain, but are most common in rocky and desert areas. Colouration varies: black, yellow, brown and even dull red. Hunting might involve patrolling their territory or waiting under a rock or in the sand to ambush victims. They attack by grabbing prey with their pincers, crushing it if possible and only bringing the venomous tail sting into play if necessary. These stats are for the larger size.

Strengths: Good [+2] Large, Good [+2] Predator, Good [+2] Pincers, Good [+2] Armour, Good [+2] Tail Sting, Good [+2] Venom, Good [+2] Scuttling, Good [+2] Lurking, Good [+2] Survivor

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Large, Poor [-2] Intellect

- *Pincers:* the initial attack is usually to grab on, and if it succeeds the target must then use suitable Qualities to get free; the scorpion can use its actions to crush, opposed by toughness but not evasion.
- *Venom:* comes into play on a successful tail strike, but is Downshifted each use. Victims failing to resist TN are paralysed.
- *Scuttling:* for moving fast or on tricky surfaces, and generally being a bit creepy to us mammals.
- *Survivor:* MOD for resisting environmental-type harm like heat, cold, toxins and even weird magical radiations.

Shark

These superb marine predators maintain a place near the top of the food chain by being very good at what they do. These stats are for a fairly substantial one; bigger and smaller versions exist.

Strengths: Good [+2] Large, Expert [+4] Predator, Expert [+4] Sharp Teeth, Expert [+4] Swimming, Expert [+4] Detect Scent

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Large, Poor [-2] Single-minded

Snake, Giant

Perhaps the commonest monster in the old pulp fantasy tales is the serpent of enormous size. They are unusual specimens, but may be found in all regions except the coldest. Stats are for one around 15 feet long. They tend to kill by constriction, but you could add Poison instead.

Strengths: Good [+2] Large, Good [+2] Quick Reactions, Good [+2] Crushing Coils, Good [+2] Intimidate Mammals, Good [+2] Keen Senses

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Large, Poor [-2] Vulnerable to Cold

Wolf

These canines are high-ranking predators in the hills and woods of the northerly lands. An individual is a foe worthy of respect, but they usually hunt in packs, coordinating with patience and cunning.

Strengths: Expert [+4] Predator, Good [+2] Scavenger, Expert [+4] Pack Hunter, Good [+2] Keen Senses, Good [+2] Enhanced Sense (sensitive smell), Good [+2] Stealth

Weaknesses: none

Wyrm

These are giant serpent-creatures - greater than giant snakes and the setting's closest equivalent to dragons. They vary in size and appearance, with rare specimens becoming truly gigantic monsters though most are in the 10-30ft range. They are all linked to one of the Urges, often reflecting the habitat where they are found. They seem to be very long-lived.

It isn't entirely clear what level of mentality they have. In general they act like fairly cunning animals, but sometimes there are hints of greater wisdom. One might even seem to aid a character or plot against them on
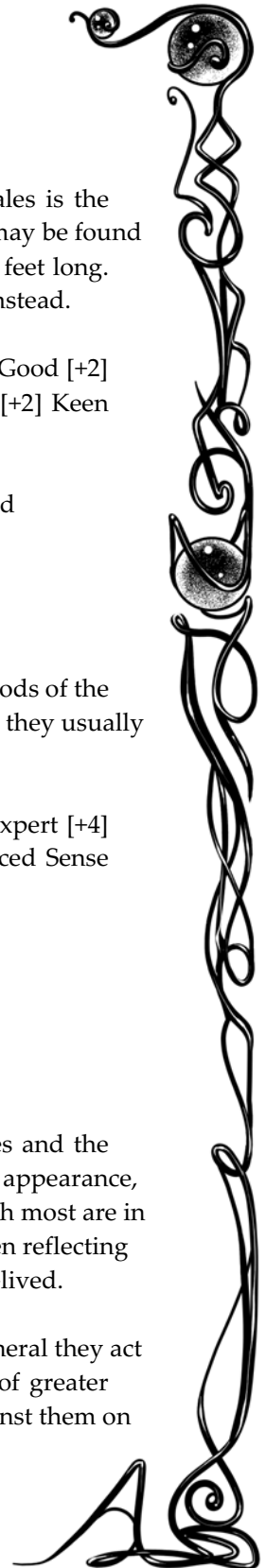
rare occasions; but in general they are simply fierce predators aiming to kill and eat people who wander into their territory.

The quick way to stat one up is to give it an overall Rank from Good to Master and set the Quality Ranks equal to that. Alternatively you can vary them a bit.

Strengths: [Rank] Large, [Rank] Predator, [Rank] Serpentine, [Rank] Tough Hide, [Rank] Keen Senses, [Rank] Urge (specify), one Good [+2] personality trait

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Large

The Unquiet Dead

Some strands of fantasy gaming mine the heck out of this vein, with vampires, ghouls, animated skeletons and whatnot around every corner. In the styles *Jaws* is aiming at this is much less common. In many pulp fantasies even the occasional ghost seems a rare thing, with creatures from the Dark the preferred source of chills. In Mark Smylie's *Artesia*, on the other hand, ghosts are quite common (a group acting as the heroine's conscience and guilt).

The fundamental point is that as far as most people are concerned what's dead should stay that way, and encountering something that hasn't is a frightening and unsettling experience. So keep them rare and always give them some level of Shocking Appearance - as well as Dead*.

Ghost

These are spirits of the dead that have remained in the physical world, ranging from shrieking, hateful marauders to lost souls evoking only pity. The ghost that acts as an invisible, intangible presence is not a great fit for the style we're after here. They should be spectral figures, though possibly only visible to certain people. By their nature they're obsessive personalities to some degree.

Some ghosts are merely a collection of impulses, echoes of a violent death or unfulfilled life, with varying amounts of personality. They might not even realise they're dead. Others are fully intelligent and aware, usually with a clear purpose. Ghosts almost always have an **anchor** - a person, place or object that they must stay close to. Destroying the anchor *might* banish the ghost, but it'll probably fight tooth and nail to prevent this. Fighting one physically is difficult to impossible - that's not what they're about. The safest way to get rid of a ghost is to satisfy the impulse that keeps it here, for example grand-daughter is happy, revenge is achieved, message is delivered.

Here's an example write-up.

> **Strengths:** Master [+6] Incorporeal*, Expert [+4] Invisible*, Master [+6] Dead*, Average [0] Shocking Appearance, Good [+2] occupation, Good [+2] personality trait; possible special abilities

> **Weaknesses:** Poor [-2] Dead, possibly Poor [-2] Obsessed, and Poor [-2] Self-Awareness or Intellect for a fragmentary spirit

Ghosts can develop special powers. The following are common, though a given spirit would probably have just one or two.

- *Energy Drain*: a chilling touch attack.
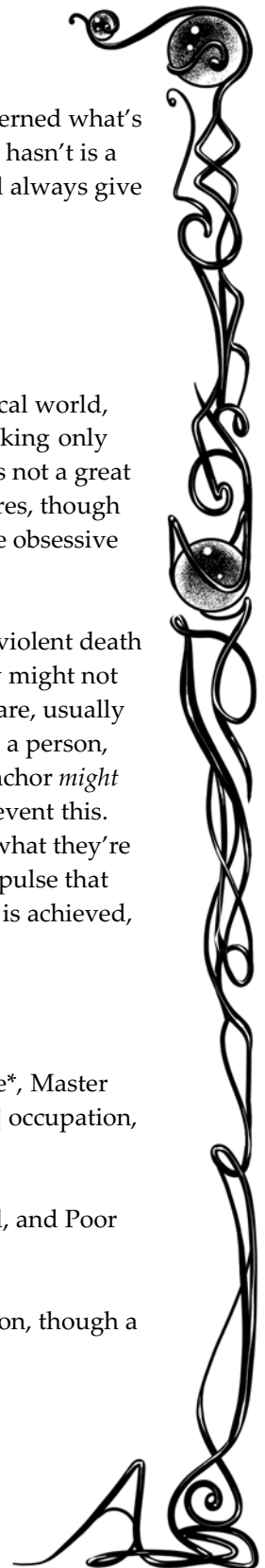
- *Impression*:* an invisible spirit can convey fleeting sensory echoes of the ghost's life or death, perhaps unconsciously or as an attempt to communicate, potentially causing Failure Ranks of fear. (Sound, smell and texture are more atmospheric than sight.)

- *Shocking Appearance*:* the ghost can take on a more frightening form and use this as a fear attack.

- *Move Object*:* affecting the physical world by willpower. It's like a hand with a range of about a room but Downshifted strength and coordination.

- *Possession*:* taking over the body of a living person. Only powerful ones can do this, but others might be able to use a *Suggestion** ability to "push" a living person to do a certain task.

Walking corpse

These are dead bodies animated by magic. They are strong and hard to hurt. Some have only enough mind to follow the commands of a master or perhaps vague instincts from their living days (like going home or getting revenge). Here's an example of a mindless rotting shambler.

Strengths: Good [+2] Dead*, Good [+2] Strong, Good [+2] Shocking Appearance, Good [+2] Night Vision

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Dead (e.g. affects social interactions), Poor [-2] Stupid, Poor [-2] Slow

Others might be tougher, and even have a fully aware indwelling spirit. Give them a fuller set of Strengths to reflect their talents and personality (the simplest version would be Good in an occupation) and remove the Stupid Weakness. Here's an example of something fairly high-powered.

Strengths: Expert [+4] Dead* , Expert [+4] Strong, Good [+2] Single-Minded, Good [+2] occupation (specify one, dimly retained from when alive), Good [+2] personality trait (ditto), Good [+2] Darksense

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Dead (tends to colour social interactions), Poor [-2] Slow-moving, Poor [-2] Vulnerable to Fire

Things from the Dark

"A devil from the Outer Dark," he grunted. "Oh, they're nothing uncommon. They lurk as thick as fleas outside the belt of light which surrounds this world. I've heard the wise men of Zamora talk of them. Some find their way to Earth, but when they do they have to take on Earthly form and flesh of some sort. A man like myself, with a sword, is a match for any amount of fangs and talons, infernal or terrestrial."

A somewhat experienced Conan
'The Vale of Lost Women' by Robert E. Howard

These don't really fall into types - each one (or, occasionally, group) is unique and should be crafted to order.

They're not so much evil as *different* - they have their own goals, often unguessable, and have no interest in human lives and souls except, perhaps, as a light snack. Certainly if people get in the way of such creatures they'll meet a horrible fate. If there is evil involved it's the people who summon up such danger and let it loose on the populace.

Such creatures, written as alien dangers rather than plundering traditional folklore (as other strands of fantasy gaming are wont to do), draw from the same well as the "Cthulhu mythos" of H.P. Lovecraft and others. This is not surprising, as the old pulp fantasy tales were written around the same time, appeared in the same periodicals and in many cases came from the same authors. However, in the mythos tales (and RPGs derived from them) even the smaller entities are usually too frightening and physically dangerous to confront directly, whereas in the sword and sorcery tales a character armed with a good blade and dramatic importance can take them on (though minor characters are still likely to lose their wits or be digested).
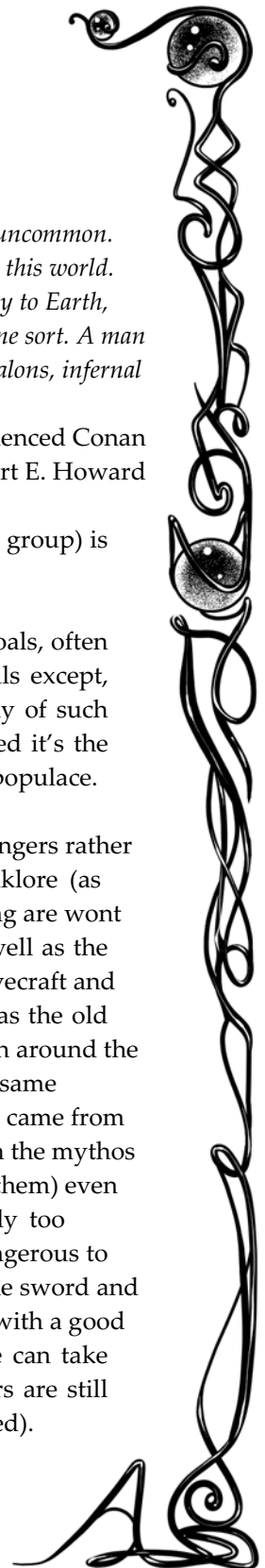
Entities from the Dark should either be quite like some form of earthly life, though twisted (e.g. a great black ape with smouldering eyes), or completely unlike it (e.g. an amorphous mass or sliding shadow). Those from the Near Dark are more like the things of our world - some might even resemble humans - and those of the Distant Dark less so.

In terms of Qualities, you can pick and choose from the creature Qualities given earlier. The only constants are that they all have some level of Shocking Appearance and Darksense (even if it's Average), and they should always present a significant challenge (never treated as minions). Here are a couple of examples.

Demon ape

This is a relatively modest threat from the nearer reaches, suitable for a sorcerer to call forth from behind the wall hangings when confronted by fairly new player characters. (It's based on the giant ape in *Fierce beasts*.) It appears like a huge ape with night-black hair and red eyes.

Strengths: Master [+6] Strong, Expert [+4] Tough, Good [+2] Fierce, Good [+2] Keen Senses, Good [+2] Climbing, Good [+2] Camouflage in darkness, Average [0] Shocking Appearance, Average [0] Darksense

Weaknesses: none

The crawler in the catacombs

This is a more serious threat from further down in the Dark. It's a large, amorphous tentacled mass clearly not of this world.

Strengths: Good [+2] Large, Good [+2] Predator, Good [+2] Shocking Appearance, Good [+2] Amorphous, Expert [+4] Extra Appendages, Good [+2] Fearsome Maw, Good [+2] Underground Dweller, Expert [+4] Darksense

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Large

# GM's Notes

ADAPTING TO OTHER FANTASY SETTINGS

You should be able to use the rules in this book for most fantasy games toward the pulpy or gritty end of the genre, with a little adaptation. You might do this with a favourite novel series, or as a conversion of another RPG if you're looking for a lighter system. This section goes through some of the areas you might want to look at. Using *Jaws* for other sorts of fantasy, like high-powered swashbuckling with magic everywhere, would also be possible but much more of a stretch.

Other PDQ games

There are other PDQ fantasy games around, and some of the ideas in those could find more general application. (If you're after the more high fantasy style one of these might be a better start point altogether.)

Questers of the Middle Realms, also published by Silver Branch Games, is aimed at a humorous take on traditional fantasy gaming like Wizards of the Coast's *Dungeons & Dragons*, but it could certainly be used more seriously. QMR was the previous PDQ fantasy game that I wrote and I'll refer to elements of it in the following notes.

The Zorcerer of Zo by Atomic Sock Monkey Press is aimed at fairytale fantasy in the style of Oz, Narnia or anything that involves talking toys and animals defending what is good and right. However, the rules in there would apply pretty well to a game set in Middle Earth;
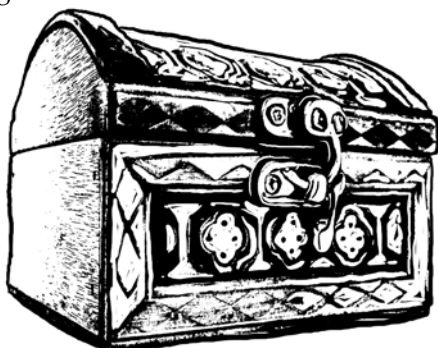
they cover ordinary skills and faculties raised to a magical level (Legolas, we're looking at you) and a very loose approach to magic. There's also lots of interesting info about how the original ZoZ campaign was planned and run, as a guide for budding (and, indeed, somewhat wrinkled and mildewy) GMs.

Swashbucklers of the Seven Skies, also by Atomic Sock Monkey Press, is being developed at the same time as *Jaws* and should appear in 2009. It'll contain a version of the PDQ system that's optimised for swashbuckling action in the style of the Three Musketeers and *The Princess Bride*; and a setting of sailing ships that fly between islands in an endless sky.

"Funnelling" Qualities

In the Six Serpents setting the mandatory freebies everyone starts with - People, Faculty, Driver - are chosen to encourage characters who are competent and motivated to action. This sets a baseline for what they can do and ensures certain options for generating story hooks.

It's recommended that you always have a bit of this "funnelling" going on, but for other styles you might want to change it to give a different emphasis. Some forms of sword and sorcery might dispense with Peoples, because characters' descent is not of any interest at all. *Questers'* funnelling Qualities are the character's Homeland and the Organisation they belonged to before play, so they're tied to the setting and feel like they've come from somewhere. You probably want 1-3 Funnelling Qualities (2 in most cases) depending on what you want to capture.

Here are some other possibilities.

- If you want a strong military flavour - like Mark Smylie's *Artesia* or Glen Cook's *Black Company* - you might push everyone to take a Quality in the kind of unit they've served with, or perhaps an associated role (Infantry, Cavalry, Scout, Physician, etc), with the Rank giving some indication of, well, rank.

- If you're using a setting with character occupations that are strongly distinctive and important for setting flavour - like Games
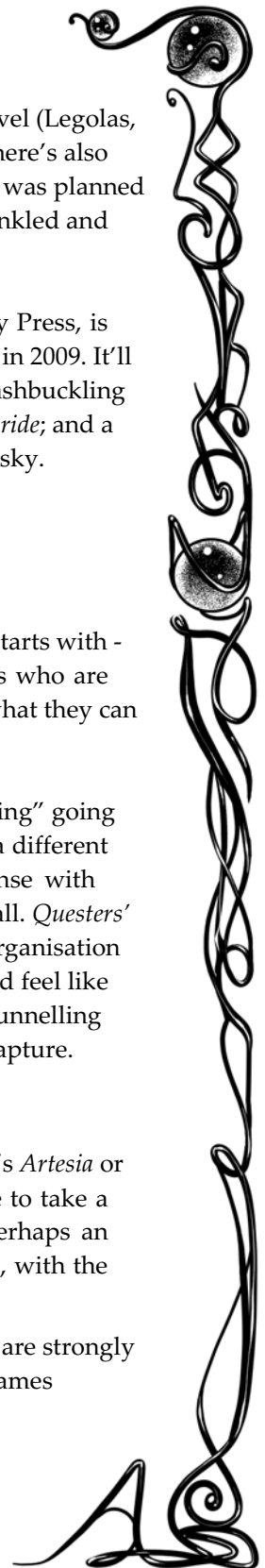
Workshop's *Warhammer* - you might have an "approved" list of those for characters to allocate at least some of their past experience.

- David Gemmell's novels tend to feature characters who are pretty capable in at least one area and do a lot of introspecting, often in the shadow of imminent doom. You might say that the Funnelling Qualities for them are a Skill plus something more internal, which you might specify as a couple of options from Hope, Regret, Past, Secret, Destiny (to achieve great things, meet some doom, or possibly both - see box in character creation section) or similar.

Races

By which we mean intelligent species like elves and dwarves. In a lot of the source material *Jaws* is aimed at these simply don't exist - it's all humans - but you might want to bring them in. *Questers* covers this in more detail, but the core concept is to use paired racial Qualities like Good [+2] Elf, Poor [-2] Elf. Provided that your group has a clear idea of the race you can tell what sorts of tasks it will be stronger or weaker in - maybe elves are good at tasks requiring agility and bad at shrugging off physical damage, while dwarves are the reverse. (Giving races special power-like abilities is outside the scope of these notes.)

Humans are kind of a baseline, so instead of paired Human Qualities they get an extra personality-type Quality like Brave, Jolly or Authoritative at Good, and no extra Weakness (which does balance, as racial Strengths are typically useful in a wide range of situations).

You might build up a racial Strength with further Ranks at character creation if the race is an important part of the character concept.

Danger Levels

You could set guidelines for how these apply in order to reflect your setting. For instance, if you want to play in another game setting using these rules and the original makes use of "critical hits" that give gory details of damage to various body parts, you could say that any combat

with an important character is a Risk situation that can result in Scars. It's not quite the same, as Scars take effect after the present conflict rather than during it. If you want to make things *really* dangerous, allow physical fighting with minor characters to be a Risk situation too and let the player characters rack up Weaknesses. You could bring in Doom more often as well, so that characters face permanent extinction in most major confrontations, but over-egging that particular pudding really runs counter to the spirit of PDQ.

Fortune Points

The options for gaining and using these can definitely be changed to support the desired style of play; you might even rename them to Hero Points or some such. Three or four is about the right number for a set of spending options, just because it's easy to remember, but you could have any number you like. They don't all have to cost a single point: you might decide some affect the story in more powerful ways and cost 2 points or even more, but obviously that makes it a bit harder for the group to hold in their heads. You'll probably want to keep the re-rolling option every time. Here are some other examples.

- Recovering damage - this is in several other PDQ games but has been left out of the options here. A point might buy 1d6 damage Ranks of any sort back, or you might have to choose either 1d6 Failure Ranks or 1 Damage Rank.

- Buying off Ranks of damage you're about to take, for instance dropping it down to a single Rank.

- Upshifting the damage you're about to do, having just made a successful attack (without downshifting anything else as *Jaws* does).

- Getting an extra action (as a one-off - might be particularly useful if you're interested in more tactical combat). Does it happen alongside your normal one, or after everyone has acted?

- Improve your initiative - how much would depend on your game's style, from "one Rank" to "before everybody else". (It probably shouldn't trump supernatural speed/reaction powers.)
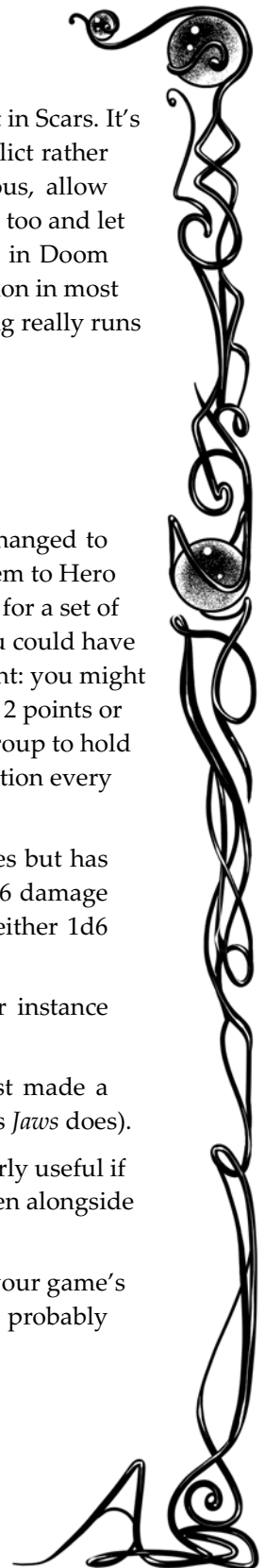
Magic

Other PDQ games have handled magic differently. In general you have one or more Qualities for magical ability, from specific like Summon Circle of Fire to broader like Fire Magic (not usually very broad like Wizard, but it's possible). The first Rank purchased is Average, as here, giving a trade-off in potency and overall character toughness. When casting a spell, Rank indicates ability to control the magic *and* the maximum Intensity you can achieve on the chart.

Here are some issues to think about.

Breadth. A magic Quality might be general casting ability, a particular school or division of magic, or a specific spell. Maybe different people have access to different ones, in a similar way to Sorcery and Charms. For instance it'd be easy to add themed variants of Sorcery like Serpent Sorcery* or Fire Sorcery* that are flexible but only within their theme.

Cost. In *Questers* casting requires you to check for fatigue, taking a Fatigue Rank if you fail and so limiting the number of spells you can cast in a scene. That's quite a mechanical way of doing things: at the other end of the scale the cost of magic might be that problematic things happen in the story (as in *Zorcerer of Zo*).

Reliability. This could be related to cost - what's the chance that magic will go wild, and what happens if it does? You could rule that any spell escapes the caster's control if you roll double 1s, for instance, maybe causing damaging backlash or creating an unintended effect.

> *Author's note.* Personally I find magic uninteresting if it doesn't have some sort of consequence for the user, at least potentially. I don't like fire-and-forget artillery mages.

Items. It might be fairly common to have permanently enchanted objects. They might have some Quality attached to them, reflecting some mundane or supernatural property like increased durability; or they might contain a magical power that can be triggered once per scene, once per day or some such.

BASIC GM ADVICE

So, you've stepped forward (or been pushed!) to be the Game Master running *Jaws* for your group. The GM has more work to do than the other players, and more responsibility. It's your role to facilitate the enjoyment of the group, to prepare adventures for the characters to run through, and to adjudicate decisions in play. When it works, it's a good feeling. When it doesn't it's like the proverbial herding cats - very frustrating. This section gives you a few tips for achieving the former.

Trust

With any RPG the most important factor in having a good game is having a good group: people who can get along together, communicate as reasonable human beings, and form a consensus about what sort of game they'll enjoy. This is especially important with the PDQ system, which makes for "high trust" games. You don't have vast swathes of rules to cover every eventuality, which places the burden of smooth running more on the players' ability to work together for shared fun within the bounds of the setting. It's a good idea to make sure everyone's happy working this way before you start.

Tone

Another thing to make sure you all agree on is the tone of the game. For the kind of fantasy *Jaws* seeks to deliver this
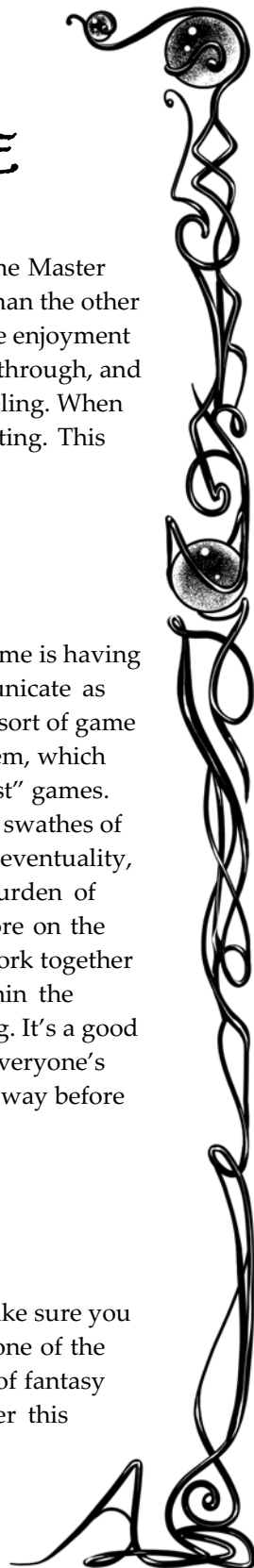
shouldn't be too light or wacky: there might be humorous or eccentric character moments, but there should also be scenes of genuine peril and an occasional sense of horror lurking beyond the everyday world. You could run fairly superficial pulpy action tales, or have the characters working hard to survive an uncaring world, or play up elements of the supernatural and human corruption. If everyone has a clear picture of what you're going for they can choose Qualities appropriately rather than picking stuff that breaks the mood.

Setting Up Adventures

Goals

The most basic underpinning of an adventure is a goal: what are the characters supposed to be doing? These are often very simple, like "Guard the caravan till it gets to the city" or "Retrieve the amulet from the ancient crypt". The adventure itself consists of the stuff that happens in the process of achieving the goal. (It might include a change of goal too - maybe part-way through they find things are not as they thought, like the lady who hired you actually being a witch who wants the amulet to afflict the city with plague.)

If you adopt the quest-type model common in fantasy gaming and fiction it really is this simple. The bits that make the story interesting are provided by the characters' actions and interactions along the way, and PDQ is particularly handy for enabling that (especially through Story Hooks).

However, remember one thing: a goal will only work if the players care about it. That means there must be a plausible reason why the characters would take it on board, and it must sound like a fun thing to do. If the whole forward motion of your game depends on a hook that nobody's interested in or willing to follow up you'll be tying yourself in knots trying to get things going again.

Matching challenges

The general toughness of an opponent is based around the sheer number of Quality Ranks it has. What those Qualities are, compared to those of the player characters, makes a difference (maybe a big one) but the most basic measure is the amount of damage needed to take it down. You can try to match this to the player characters, but their numbers of "hit points" will vary according to development choices. For instance, taking a large number of Qualities at low level makes you slightly tougher than concentrating your ranks in a smaller number of abilities, because of the Average and Poor levels you get automatically when you take a Quality at Good. Most starting characters will have 11-16 "hit points". You might find it useful to track the number of Rank increases players have bought with Learning Points.

You can make an opponent a bit tougher by giving it a Prop or two. However, you then have to be prepared for the player characters to get hold of those Props if they defeat it. Don't put anything in there that'll unbalance your game or short-circuit the plot.

Hazards

Traps, nasty environments, falls, burns, are all in the category of inanimate stuff that's bad for the characters. In most cases you can just represent it with a Target Number that must be opposed by any relevant abilities the characters possess, so it's just the usual question of picking a Rank to reflect its degree of nastiness. The Magic Intensity Table might give some assistance in fixing a Rank.

> *Example.* Janos is exploring a ruined temple and fails to notice an Expert (+4) Pit Trap in time. He convinces the GM that his Expert (+4) Outdoorsman applies because the situation is similar to losing your footing on a mountain scramble (another GM might not have agreed), and Good (+2) Toughness will clearly help to resist damage from the fall. So Janos is rolling +6 against the Expert Target Number, 11. He rolls a measly 2 and 1, for a total of 9. He takes 2 Damage Ranks and now has to think of a way to get out.
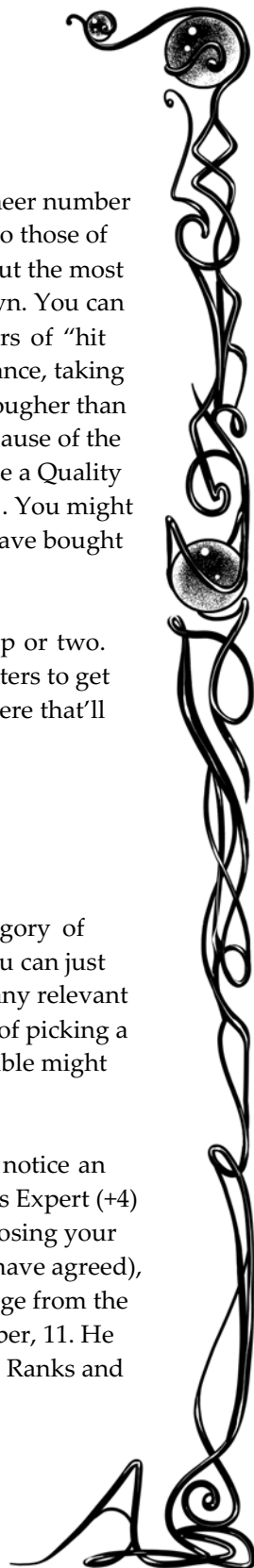
Hazards can have different **consequences**. In the example above, the victim got hurt *and* ended up in a difficult situation. Consequences usually involve:

- **damage** - which can mean all sorts of things in PDQ, measured in Damage and Failure Ranks, wearing the character down;

- a **condition** - like being unable to move or see, perhaps imposing a Target Number (maybe Janos has a TN 11 climbing task ahead of him) on further activity or blocking the character from some types of action for a while (like succumbing to sleeping gas);

- or both!

Decide what these will be when you design a hazard, but be fair - you're not trying to beat the characters or players, but to put them on that rollercoaster of peril-escape-peril-escape.

> Note: hazards can be a good opportunity to use the Fortune Points option *Fickle Finger of Fate*, for instance if you want everyone to be affected by the sleeping gas with no chance to resist, in order to move to a scene in a villain's lair. This is definitely high trust stuff: the players have to know that you're not trying to beat them but to build a more enjoyable story.

In some cases you might want a bit more detail. Then you can treat the hazard just as if it were a character, giving it a few appropriate Qualities (in the same way as special items). For example you might have Pit Trap: Good (+2) Deep, Good (+2) Spikes. What this does is add the potential for more sophisticated interactions. Some things the characters do will only involve one of the hazard's Qualities (climbing out only uses Deep) but others might have the Qualities ganging up (falling in would use both Deep and Spikes).

Rewards

Players like to get short-term goodies. Those with experience of other fantasy games, in particular, are likely to have been trained to go searching for loot the moment an opponent is defeated.

That naked princesses thing...

The original sword and sorcery tales were products of a different age. For instance Robert E. Howard's short stories of Conan, written in the 1930s, often feature a female foil who is helpless against the physically (or sorcerously) stronger males, though she has an even chance of possessing quick wits and a strong will. She probably has minimal clothing and will lose even this as the story progresses. Howard sometimes uses it as a measure of character that Conan doesn't force himself on these women. Other sword and sorcery "heroes" do, though, or at least treat the idea as a routine one.

This fits somewhat uncomfortably with modern sensibilities (although looking at our fictional media one can sometimes wonder how much change there's really been). In your game you will certainly want to allow strong female player characters (according to Ron Edwards' supplement *Sorcerer and Sword* - see *Sources and inspiration* at the end of the book - there were a couple of early sword and sorcery heroines, so they were rare but not unknown). In the interests of equal opportunities you could either decide that all NPCs keep their clothes firmly on, or allow all PCs access to their preferred choice of companion with a non-stick wardrobe.

You need to encourage them out of that habit. It's true that for this style of fantasy characters are often very explicitly out for personal gain, but that acts as an overall motivation to get them into the events of the story rather than dictating their actions on the micro level. If they've broken into the temple for the Ruby Eye of the Sleeping God they're not going to stop for every guard's pocket change. In general, rewards come through quest completion and Fortune Points gathered along the way.

Having said that, of course if they need a sword and someone has dropped one they'll pick it up. If the GM has fed them a rumour that an individual carries something important on his person, of course they'll look for it; alternatively it's quite in-genre for something important to fall out of the hand or clothing of a defeated foe.
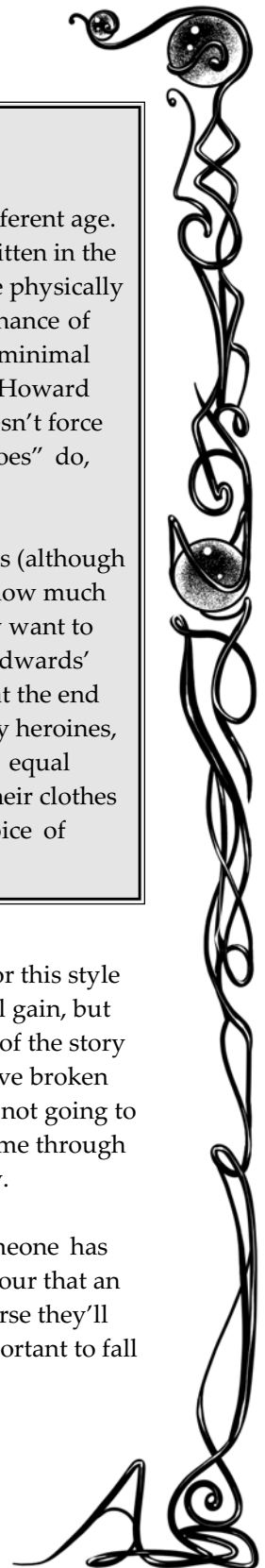
In Play

Spotlight

Possibly the most important thing to remember when running a game is that all the players are there to have fun through their character, and that means showing off: from time to time that character must do something really impressive or otherwise entertaining. That means your story has to give opportunities to do this. If you have a group composed entirely of brawny barbarians don't give them an adventure revolving around solving clever clues. Clearly the players are all in it for the fighting, so have one or two clues, play up the barbarians' puzzlement and eventual lucky success, then get on to the lamentation of the enemies. You could turn the same example round for a group of weaselly wizards.

You also need to keep players' spotlight time roughly equal. If the action focuses on one character for a while, try to find things to keep the other players interested (like amusing or exciting developments, or even giving them a non-player character to run) and give their characters plenty to do soon afterwards.

Scenery and description

Many of the old pulp fantasy stories had a *lot* of description of characters' surroundings, painting vivid word-pictures and creating atmosphere (sometimes as the main goal of the story). So it definitely needs consideration - but in a game environment you won't be able to go to nearly the same lengths before people start to lose interest. See what suits your group. In general you want locations and scenery to have enough of an interesting presence to remind everyone that they're in a fantasy setting without the description getting in the way of the focus on the characters' actions.

So, come up with some interesting locations for the characters to visit. That could mean impressive ("The ancient statues guarding the pass tower above you"); or unusual; or just the kind of place your players

wouldn't normally go ("You descend into the sewers below the city"); or the sort of place they *would* go, but presented in a way distinctive to the game setting (a bar crowded with fantasy characters).

Then describe them in a way that's evocative but, most of all, concise. Pick a few key features that'll sum up the location (or creature or whatever). The players will tell you if they want more by asking questions. To start with think of two things.

- What impressions would they get first? If you open a door into a room containing two dozen walking skeletons with glowing red eyes, your initial impression is not going to focus on the style of the decorative plasterwork. You can compress these extra details, e.g. "It's a fancy room - full of skeletons!", or just omit them until the initial impressions are dealt with.

- Use all the senses. Humans are strongly oriented toward sight, and take in most detail that way, but other senses often affect us more powerfully - describing an unusual sound or smell can be a good way to increase atmosphere.

Story Hooks

It's probably a good idea to talk to your players about this before starting, just to make sure everyone's on the same page about it. Some people will prefer to focus on the mission at hand, while others will be happier to wander off exploring other bits of their character's life.

What it does for you is to enable those sorts of side tangents that make straightforward quest-type stories more interesting, without *requiring* preparation work (though it might be worth scribbling down some possible riffs on the PCs' Qualities as a resource, to avoid being stumped when they come up). Because the players have identified their own Qualities *and* chosen which ones take hits to generate Hooks, these episodes should be pretty good at highlighting aspects of the character they want to play.
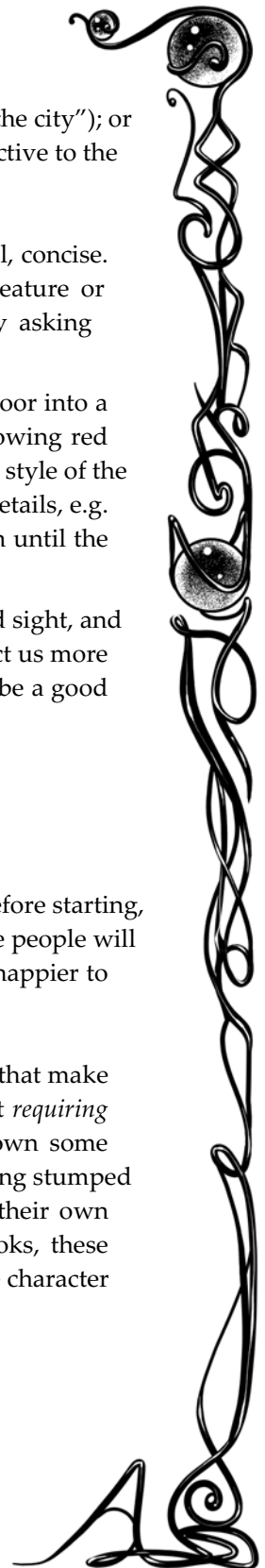
Problems in the group

Sometimes players disrupt the game or suck the energy out of it by their behaviour. If friendly hints don't work, the best option is to have a private word with them to find out what's going on.

As GM your job is to try to make sure everyone round the table is having fun. If that person isn't, you'll want to see whether you can make some changes to help them enjoy it. Or maybe they're just having a bad day - we all do - and need a bit of understanding from the group this session. Maybe they didn't even realise that they were creating a problem, and will fix it once it's explained to them. Any number of things might be going on.

On the other hand, as GM you're responsible to the group as a whole, and you'll need to set some limits beyond which you won't tolerate one person's behaviour spoiling things for others. If the worst comes to the worst and someone repeatedly fails to mend their ways after an honest but tactful chat, you might have to ask them to leave the group. Hopefully it won't happen to you. But remember, one of the people who's supposed to be having fun is *you*; taking on the GMing job means you should try to be considerate and flexible, but you don't have to be a doormat.

Adventure seeds

- The characters are robbing some location, having heard that great wealth or some sorcerous item can be had easily, and find that the resident sorcerer is more alert than expected and has death-traps they must escape or long tendrils of revenge that follow them as they flee; or that the inhuman guardians are less long-dead than advertised. This could be a delayed effect, where the characters believe they have triumphed but find they must pay a terrible price. Stories in these genres often don't have neat and comfortable endings.

- The characters are brought into the service of a powerful patron. At first it seems like a good deal, either because it pays well or because it's a way out of serious trouble. As time goes on and they find out more about the nature, actions and/or intentions of their patron they face serious questions of ethics or self-preservation. Perhaps they see how local people suffer under a lord's rule, or his intended bride (and perhaps her brave and noble true love) win them over. This could be the backdrop to a single adventure along the lines of "Just fetch me this item", or to a whole storyline as it is in the first *Black Company* book.

- Some faction is plotting to take over a city or other area by nefarious means. The characters stumble into the middle of it - perhaps through mistaken identity, avenging some insult by someone who happens to be involved, or some personal connection to an actual or potential victim - and by their great prowess manage to foil the plot.

- The characters are caught up in the siege of a castle, walled town or even just a farming village. Maybe they are in the military, or have been recruited by the locals to help (perhaps the job sounded like easy money), or are just caught inside and must do their bit to marshal the defences. The attacking forces probably seem much more powerful than their own. What qualities can they bring into play to secure victory? What personal journeys will the characters go on? Will anyone pay the ultimate price?
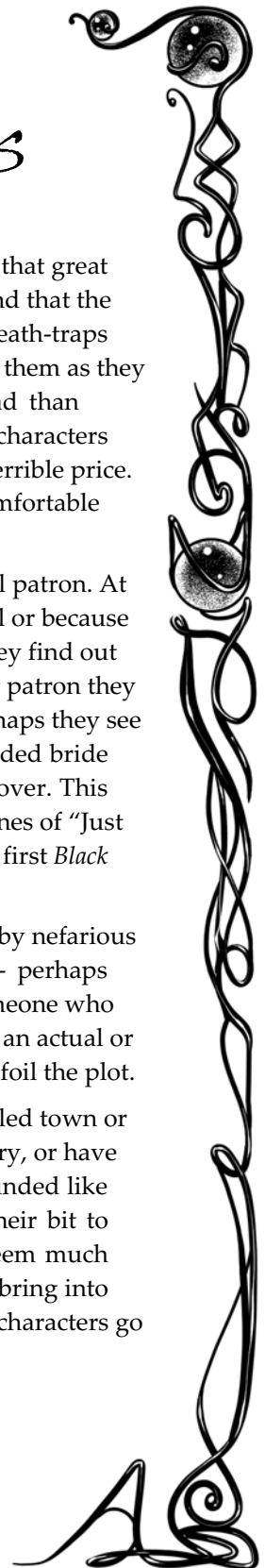
The Tower of Emeth Tol

This is a sketchy outline of a short adventure, particularly close to the style of Conan. The GM is encouraged to add extra detail to flesh it out.

The tavern

The PCs start in Piscay, one of the River Towns (or, indeed, pretty much anywhere else). The River Towns are generally fairly lawful, but the dock areas somewhat less so. The tavern known as The Bled Ox, where the characters are carousing, is in such a place. Two things happen.

First, just for fun, they get into a bar fight. Their opponents are minions, mostly Good [+2] Thugs (i.e. no more stats than that unless you find a particular need). The main point is to make the PCs look impressive, so have as many as you think they can handle before getting scuffed - probably twice their number, give or take. Tougher party members can attract more than their share and contend with the numbers die.

Second, they hear a tale about the valuable and possibly magical Idol of the Sleeping Jaguar, which is located in the Tower of Emeth Tol not too far from here. The intention, of course, is to stir their interest in stealing it. There are various ways to pass the information on. Maybe a defeated thug has a message on their person indicating that local thieves are planning to take the idol. Maybe the fight goes badly, or there are consequences afterwards, and the local thiefmaster sets the task of getting the idol to make amends. Or maybe someone in the inn sees their performance and asks them to help retrieving the idol for some reason.

The tower

You should probably fast-forward through the journey - unless you want to add a bit of interest, like an encounter with hostile wildlife, environmental hazards, or thieves from town trying to stop the PCs beating them to the prize.

It's a big stone tower with gardens surrounded by a high wall. The sorcerer employs human guards - they're at the outer gate, the tower entrance and possibly elsewhere. He might also have guardian beasts, like lions, that roam the grounds or are chained in place. Basically, use these elements to make them an obstacle course suited to their talents.

When they get in through the entrance or a window, make the interior seem unearthly. There are rooms with cabinets of barely-glimpsed stuff and strange whispering or shuffling noises off in the shadows. Try to convey that this is description for atmosphere, not clues or wandering monsters, and move them along quickly. The ground floor has reception rooms; above that are most of the displays; above that are living quarters; and at the top alchemy and sorcery workrooms.

On that floor they find a big room with rich tapestries and arcane symbols. Here is the Idol of the Sleeping Jaguar - and the sorcerer Emeth Tol to stop them taking it! Seeing that the PCs are skilled and determined, he calls out in a strange tongue and the demonic ape-thing that serves him emerges from behind a tapestry and attacks! (See p100 for stats.) Emeth Tol can hurl Average Rank spells of pain and other nastiness from a distance - at close quarters he'll probably have to rely on his knife. (For more than three PCs you might want to add some guards.)

Emeth Tol, sorcerer

He's a fairly standard issue sorcerous opponent, statted as a PC plus a couple of extra Ranks. Plenty of scope for him to grow alongside the PCs as a recurring nemesis if you wish. He wears fine robes and carries a curved knife.

People: River Towns

Strengths: Good [+2] Craft - metalwork, Good [+2] Intelligent, Good [+2] Seeks Power, Good [+2] Sorcery*, Average [0] Alchemy*, Good [+2] Willpower, Good [+2] Persuasion, Good [+2] Scholar, Good [+2] Fast as a Striking Snake

Weaknesses: Poor [-2] Civilised

The ape is destroyed and melts into foul slime, and the sorcerer is killed or escapes to fight another day. The characters can simply go back and sell the idol. Alternatively, its powers or history could form the seed for further adventures - as could additional prisoners, writings or objects you place in the tower.
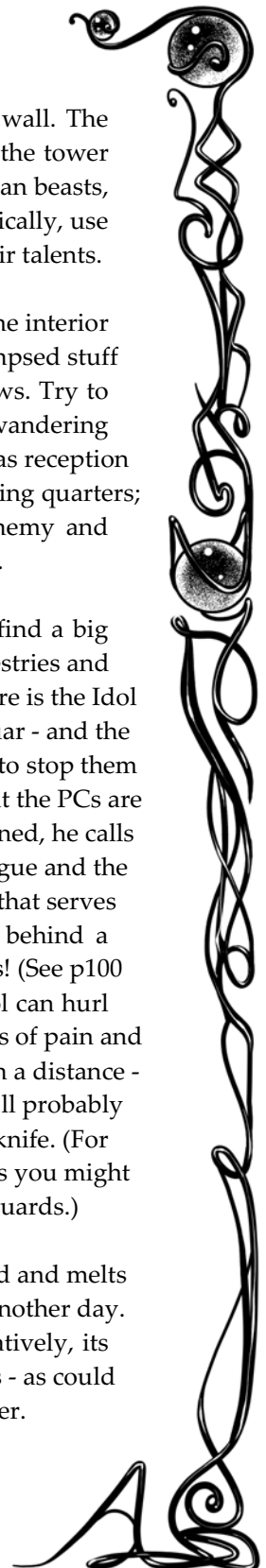
Sources and Inspiration

First of all, I don't claim to be any sort of authority on the varieties of fantasy fiction that *Jaws* is trying to emulate. There will be people among my readers who are more widely read and have a deeper understanding. I hope they will feel that this book is serviceable for the greater whole.

Of course as a consumer of fantasy one absorbs some of these flavours by sheer osmosis. In fact one of my strongest impressions beginning the project was a *colour*, the yellow-brown of a glaring sun on a sandy waste broken by ancient ruins. I was really fortunate to come across Storn's cover picture, which captures this brilliantly.

Anyway, here's a fairly random selection of media that helped form the book you (or your computer) are now holding. I dipped in and out of these during the writing of the project.

Books

Sorcerer & Sword by Ron Edwards is a supplement for the *Sorcerer* RPG. Not all the content is terribly useful if you're not playing that, or subscribing to Ron's ideas of how the gaming she is done, but it does draw out some of the common threads of s&s fiction. Critically useful for me was Ron's loving overview of the source literature over the decades.

Not a book, but I want to give a shout-out to **R.J. Grady's RPGnet column** on the sword and sorcery genre. It was written in 2003 when the internet was made of bronze, it's short and definitely tongue in cheek, but it does a good job of capturing the elements. http://www.rpg.net/news+reviews/columns/ingenre24apr03.html

The Complete Chronicles of Conan by Robert E. Howard. The big guy. A tomely black and gold hardback collecting Howard's original stories without the changes made by subsequent editors. (If we believe Edwards, neither those nor later Conan imitators should concern us.) The tales have a refreshing energy, reflecting their origin in the pulps of an earlier age.

Fritz Leiber's Lankhmar stories of Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser are other classics of the genre, written in a completely different tone to Conan: a very modern wry, intellectual, convoluted style with less raw energy and more cleverness, cousin perhaps to Vance's Dying Earth. The Fantasy Masterworks series has large collected volumes that are good value.

Nightwinds by Karl Edward Wagner was a chance find in a former smuggling village on the North Yorkshire coast. A collection of stories about Kane, an immortal swordsman of improbable strength and no small sorcerous skill, wandering through different settings and episodes. A fun example of '70s melodrama with a dark edge.

Black God's Kiss by C.L. Moore collects the stories of Jirel of Joiry, probably the first of a select group of s&s heroines. Jirel is the lady of a castle in a species of medieval France, and just happens to have a portal to a weird otherworld in the basement. The stories are mostly fever-dream travelogues of her journeys to that and other dimensions where only her towering rage saves her. Quite odd really.

David Gemmell's books are a kind of touchstone for modern dark fantasy. The characters are typically playing out larger destinies that'll leave them famous but dead - the stories are about how people find their own heroism in a world that does no favours. I've only read a few, like *Knights of Dark Renown*, but you soon catch the vibe.

The Black Company by Glen Cook. First in a series about a mercenary company in a fantasy world. The characters are tough and largely amoral, and the story focuses on their interrelationships and attempts to survive the larger events they're caught up in.

Artesia, graphic novel series written and illustrated by Mark Smylie. Gorgeous, sprawling, confusing, deadly, raunchy military supernatural epic.
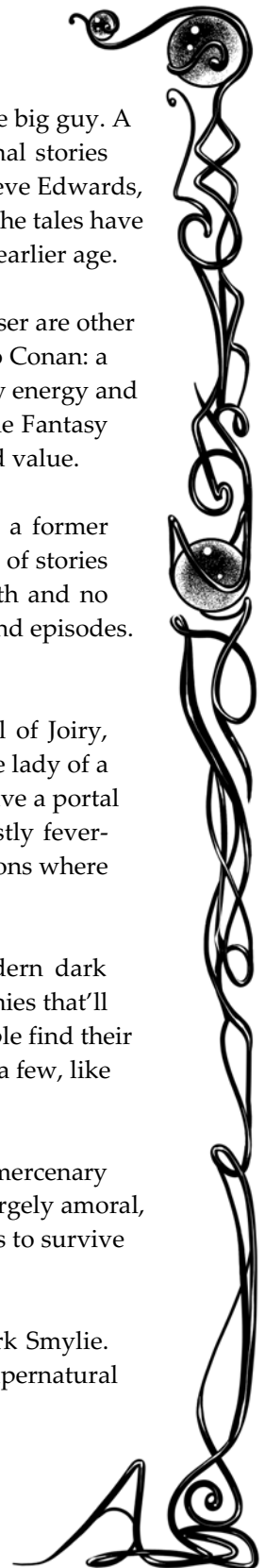
My feedback crew suggests you also check out **the short stories of Clark Ashton Smith**. While his prose is a bit more purple than Robert E Howard's, and his stories less action-packed, they evoke a decadent, evil atmosphere and provide a rich source of inspiration for sorcery. Also recommended: **The Savage Sword of Conan**, Marvel Comics' chunky b+w collections of its 1970s adaptations, with a tone true to the original tales.

Films and TV

This one's a bit fuzzy, to be honest. In the foreground is *Conan the Barbarian* with Arnold Schwarzenegger in the title role. In the back of mind was a load of other stuff like *Conan the Destroyer*, *Red Sonja* and *The Beastmaster* - none of it great art or particularly fair to the literature that spawned it, but catching just a little of the energy and atmosphere. You could probably also count *300* for sheer bloody macho doomed energy. I'm told the film of Robert E. Howard's *Kull the Conqueror* starring Kevin Sorbo is "much more entertaining than it has any right to be".

Music

Conan the Barbarian soundtrack by Basil Poledouris. Pretty much everyone who's ever worked on s&s fantasy games has sworn by this, and for good reason. Highly heroic orchestral swellings, though also somehow very much of the early '80s.

Pirates of the Caribbean - At World's End soundtrack by Hans Zimmer. I happen to really enjoy the *Pirates* series, and the music from the third movie somehow works for me here, ranging from big and dramatic to strange and off-centre.

The Mummy soundtrack by Jerry Goldsmith. It's a pulp adventure with supernatural elements, which is not far from Conan and his ilk. Would be good background music for an Egyptian/Arabian-style location.

Lord of the Rings soundtracks by Howard Shore. Written for a different style of fantasy, but still useful if you switch your mental imagery.

THE URGES

Fire

Joy, Passion, Temper, Restlessness
Light, energy, predatory beasts
Presence
Action
Red

Water

Wisdom, Nurture, Fear, Indecision
Liquids, Cold, Water creatures
Intuition
Support
Black

Metal

Determination, Self-reliance, Sorrow, Inflexibility
Constructed things
Resilience
Organisation
White

Wind

Freedom, Curiosity, Inconstancy
Vapours, Flying creatures
Reason
Change
Blue

Wood

Green
Growth
Sensuality
Living and growing things
Flexibility, Generosity, Anger, Lust

Earth

Grey
Stability
Practicality
Minerals, Burrowing creatures
Patience, Responsibility, Selfishness, Greed

PDQ MASTER CHART

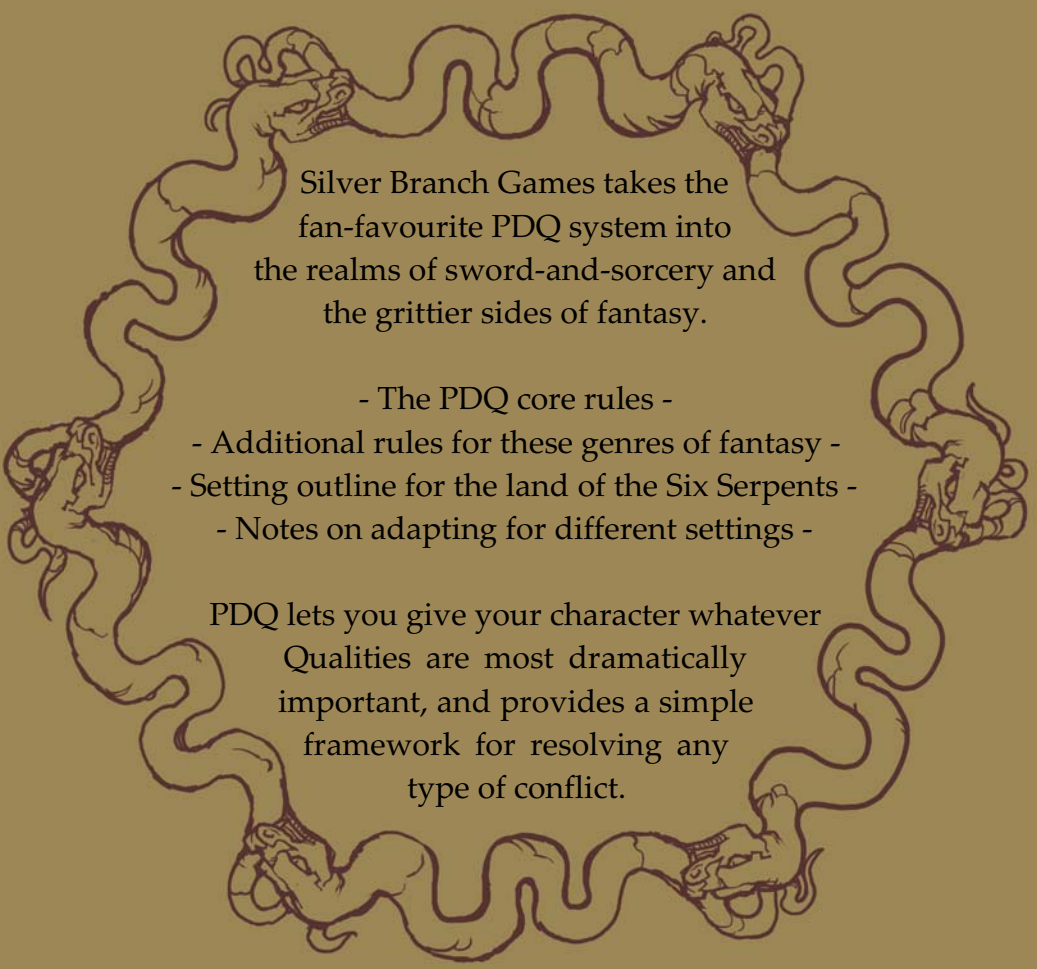| Rank	As Quality Rank	Modifier to 2D6 roll	As Difficulty Rank	Target Number
Poor	Notably inept.	-2	A trivial task.	5
Average	Typical human capability.	0	Straightforward task.	7
Good	Better than usual; most professionals or talented newcomers.	+2	Complex task, requiring attention to detail.	9
Expert	Noted/famed professional; talent with skill to back it up.	+4	Intricate task, difficult and requiring sharp concentration, hard for an average person.	11
Master	Acclaimed genius: talent with substantial skill behind it.	+6	Extremely difficult task, hard for most professionals.	13

Spending Fortune

- **Luck** – if the dice come up badly, re-roll using 1d6+6 (or 2d6+6 etc) and keep the preferred result.

- **Hell for Leather** - before making a roll, Downshift a related Quality to get an extra 1d6.

- **Narration** - establish a plausible coincidence or minor fact.

Magic Effects Table

RANK, MODIFIER, TARGET NUMBER	TIME/ DURATION	RANGE	AREA	NUMBER OF SUBJECTS	WEIGHT	FORCE	ENERGY
Poor [-2] [5]	1 action/ reaction (5 minutes)	Touch. (12 in.)	Closet (1sq yard)	1	Objects up to 1-hand weapon	Punch	Candle
Average [0] [7]	1 Turn (30 minutes)	Near (10 yards)	Room (25 sq yards)	10	Heavy person (250 lbs.)	Full tilt body check	Campfire
Good [+2] [9]	1 Scene (1 hour)	Unaided sight	Field	100	Bear, horse, small rowing boat	Sturdy club	Bonfire
Expert [+4] [11]	2 Scenes (6 hours)	A few miles	Square mile	1000	Laden wagon	Runaway wagon	Forest fire
Master [+6] [13]	4 Scenes (24 hours)	A few hundred miles	City and immediate environs	Entire city/country	Ship	Cannonball	Volcano

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