Serpentine

Thunder

Dragons and Arquebusses in a Late Medieval World

by

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Introduction

You are a dragon, a creature of awe and fear. Men have tried to kill you, but it takes guts to try, since even in sleep, your breath is deadly and your scales are thick. Your kind has also insinuated yourselves into human society to better control these dangerous mammals; it's not just a matter of metaphor that leads monarchs and emperors to use the dragon as a royal symbol.

But a new era has come, and brings with it something new. *The Gun.*

Serpentine Thunder is a roleplaying game set in the age of the early gun. Men fear dragons and would kill them if they had the chance – and with a cannon crew or a band of men armed with muskets, they have that chance. Dragons can no longer rely on the awe they inspire in men bred over generations to fear their power; they must decide how they are going to face this new era.

Requirements

You will need:

- Ten-sided dice
- index cards
- tokens to place on the cards

One of the players will take the role of the humans threatening the dragons. This role is similar to what other roleplaying games would call the gamemaster, although in **Serpentine Thunder** any player can introduce new facts to the fictional world they build during play. The gamemaster is responsible for setting up the villages and towns that the dragons must deal with. The gamemaster should immediately write "SLAIN" on one index card. This will be explained later.

The other players will take the role of the dragons. These dragons borrow from eastern and western draconic legends as well as a little bit from faerie lore; all dragons have the following features: Fangs and Talons, Scales, Leap, Shadow, Glamour, Shapeshift, and Breath, plus three optional features, Sting, Venom, and Wings.

Character Creation

Draconic Features

Fangs and Talons are a dragon's most basic weapon. Dragons can tear or bite through metal. "Fangs and Talons" is treated as a single feature rather than two separate features.

Scales are a dragon's primary defense. For a weapon to even damage a dragon, it has to pierce the dragon's scaly hide.

A dragon's giant **Leap** is what humans mistake for flight. Because they can put so much power into their leap, dragons can cross great distances; it takes several seconds for them to land. A Leap is always in a straight line, but a dragon's optional **Wings** can provide limited maneuverability and slow descent.

Shadow is the dragon's ability to become completely insubstantial. While in shadow-form, a dragon cannot be affected by anything physical, nor can the dragon affect anything physically. However, dragons need to breathe and eat, so they must emerge from Shadow eventually.

Glamour is the dragon's ability to cloud minds and trick the senses. It began as a means of communication: dragons can't speak, but communicate by showing mind-images to each other. However, human beings have no inherent glamour and thus don't understand the false nature of the mind-image, which leaves them vulnerable to being fooled. A dragon can create an illusion that affects all of the senses in any location it can see or sense. A side effect of Glamour is the ability to "speak" to humans in any language the dragon has heard; if the dragon does not actually know that language, this is mere mimicry, but otherwise can be used to communicate.

Shapeshift is the ability to take human form; some dragons are able to take other forms as well. While shifted, dragons can't use their inherent draconic abilities except for Shadow and Glamour, with Glamour being limited to the range of touch; a dragon in human form can thus "pay" for a cask of wine with faerie gold that vanishes when the dragon has left the merchant's presence, or use Glamour to disguise themselves as a well-known baron or local priest. More powerful shapeshifters can take other forms and gain abilities specific to those shapes, limited only by their Shapeshift power.

A dragon's **Breath** is one of its most dangerous features. It comes in three varieties: fiery, corrosive, and poisonous. Each dragon can only use one of these varieties. A dragon's

Breath will affect anyone close enough to touch, but a dragon can also belch a fine mist of fiery, corrosive, or poisonous droplets; this cloud dissipates as it moves; dragons with a more powerful Breath can belch farther.

Venom and **Sting** are optional attack enhancements. A bite with Venom will continue to damage its victim every day, even after the victim has left the dragon's presence; a Sting in the dragon's tail paralyzes the victim until it wears off.

These are the personal features of dragons; they may also have two other features that aren't personal in nature: **Allies** and **Hoard**. Allies represent how well the dragon has insinuated itself into human society; these can be people the dragon has befriended with while disguised as a human, political figures the dragon subtly controls through Glamour, or individuals the dragon has openly bargained with. Hoard represent the dragon's personal wealth gathered through the ages; it can be used for bribes and acquiring services legitimately.

Dragons have weaknesses: Sleep and Cold. Dragons sleep deeply and can only be awakened by touch or physical attack. Furthermore, as cold-blooded creatures, they sleep more in the winter. During cold weather, dragons will be sluggish and at a disadvantage.

Dragon Creation

Dragon character generation involves dividing 16 bonus dice between these twelve features. If a player does not assign bonus dice to Allies, Hoard, Sting, Venom, or Wings, the dragon does not have these features at all; for the other features, all dragons can use the basic feature even if it has zero bonus dice assigned to it, with the limitation that a Shapeshift of 0 means that the dragon can only take human form, not any other forms.

After assigning bonus dice, decide if the dragon's Breath is fiery, corrosive, or poisonous. Fiery and corrosive Breath do the same amount of damage, but fiery ignites flammable items, possibly doing continuing damage, while corrosive Breath destroys armor; poisonous breath, on the other hand, does double damage.

Next, choose a name for the dragon and for at least one human Ally or enemy, if the player did not put dice into Allies. If the player takes an enemy instead of Allies, the player gets to decide whether the enemy knows the character's draconic nature or not.

Also, describe in one or two sentences where the dragon lives and what its involvement with nearby humans has been. Is the dragon living secretly as a human? Living in a cave? Living deep underground in a hidden underground palace, reachable only by Shadow?

Finish off by deciding (but not writing down) the dragon's attitude towards humans: Help, Harm, or Ignore? Openly or Hidden? And are their limits or exceptions? You don't write this down because you can change it at any time: it's just a distillation of your goal as a dragon.

All of these details should fit on one index card or character sheet. Each player should also take two index cards and write "LEAP" on one and "BREATH" on the other, since these will be used frequently during play.

Village Creation

The gamemaster gets to generate villages and towns instead of dragons. Each village only gets eight bonus dice instead of 16, but it's much harder to "kill" a village than it is to kill a dragon; you kill individual people instead. If during play the dragons decide to relocate to a town, the gamemaster gets to design it with 12 bonus dice instead of eight. Villages and towns have the following features: Craft, Metalwork, Trade, Walls, Knights, Expertise, Winter.

Craft is the village's ability to work with wood and other goods softer than metal. It can be used to make spears and arrows, or to design ingenious traps. It's also the village's chemical skill, used for making gunpowder. With Craft 0 and an appropriate craftsman, a village can produce everything except gunpowder; gunpowder requires Craft 1.

Metalwork is the skill villages need in order to produce guns themselves, or any other metal items like armor or swords. If a village has a blacksmith, it can produce metal items other than guns even if Metalwork is 0; muskets and canon require at least Metalwork 1.

Trade represents contact with other villages as well as prosperity. If a village doesn't have Metalwork 1+ to make guns or Craft 1+ to make gunpowder, it can still use Trade to get these items.

Walls provide basic defense; to enter a walled village, a dragon needs to either destroy it physically, Leap over it, or enter by subterfuge, bribery, or similar methods. Walls can be repaired with Craft.

Knights are armored military men. As long as a village's Knights score is positive, the local feudal lord can send retainers and mercenaries to deal with any known dragons. Each knight will have a starting Armor score equal to the village's Knights rating. If Knights equals 0, the village can still raise and equip an army (with Craft or Metalwork) or hire mercenaries (with Trade.)

a village's **Expertise** score represents its ability to raise skilled specialists: blacksmiths, chemists, physicians, archers. Villages will have enough skill to perform necessary functions like shoe a horse, grow crops, or brew beer or wine even with an Expertise of 0. However, having a skilled blacksmith adds Expertise to attempts to make armor or guns; having a skilled chemist adds Expertise to making gunpowder; having a skilled archer gives an opportunity to attack from a distance even without guns; having a skilled physician enables knights and mercenaries to be healed.

Winter represents how cold it gets in this area during the winter. The group keeps track of the seasons; in mid-autumn, the gamemaster can begin asking for Winter rolls to see if the weather gets colder; after mid-winter, players can ask for rolls to see if the weather warms up. This is covered in more detail later.

Beginning the Game

NPC Creation and Dispute Rolls

After assigning bonus dice to a village's features, both the players and the gamemaster need to create important human characters in the village. Players create their Allies or enemies and should have already created names during an earlier step, but this this stage assigns backgrounds to those characters. The GM meanwhile creates a couple important locals: the lord of the nearest manor, perhaps, an abbot of a monastery, any experts the village needs for the beginning of the story. This phase is done as a group, after the creation of dragons and the village, because it introduces the basic mechanics of conflict resolution, in the form of **Dispute Rolls**.

For each human NPC, the players and the GM beginning by discussing the basic facts about the character. These are physical, educational, economic or social facts, and each fact has the potential of acting as a bonus or penalty during conflicts. Some sample facts:

> PHYSICAL: big, fast, ambidextrous, or any other physical descriptor
>
> EDUCATIONAL: expertise, experiences with other regions (previously lived in another town, visited king's court)
>
> ECONOMIC: wealth, personal possessions (sword, armor, fortress, horse)
>
> SOCIAL: the NPC's social status (abbot, lord, king,) who the NPC knows, guilds or groups the NPC belongs to

The exact category a fact falls under isn't important; the categories are merely a suggestion to make clear what kinds of facts are not allowed: personality, motivations, moods, and opinions. All of these are determined by whoever is playing that character at that moment and does not need to be revealed in any way except through that character's actions.

As a brief aside, the gamemaster should pick Awe, Hate or Fear as the basic attitude of a given NPC towards dragons. Again, this is not revealed; it's a guide for the GM on how to play an NPC. It does not necessarily remain the same throughout the game, nor does it have to be the same for every dragon, or for every kind of situation involving dragons. Since players will be playing their Allies as NPCs, they can choose Awe, Hate or Fear as the Ally's attitude as well, although the default is assumed to be Awe. NPCs who feel Awe towards dragons may potentially side with them, or at least suggest making peace with dragons. Hate and Fear, in contrast, indicate conflict with dragons, with Hate being

aggressive ("let's go up to the dragon's cave and kill it right now!") and Fear being defense ("I just saw a dragon emerge from that hill! RUN!")

When the players and the gamemaster suggest facts about a character, one or more facts are bound to be disputed. Record any fact that is accepted by everyone at the table; that immediately becomes part of the character. If a fact is disputed, the person who disagrees with that fact can say either "that contradicts the setting" (or contradicts another fact already accepted,) or the person could say "that fact is acceptable, but I'm challenging it".

If a player feels the fact is a contradiction, the group should discuss why it is or isn't contradictory, perhaps rewording the fact to resolve the contradiction. If a player is just challenging the fact, then there can be some suggestions on rewording to see if the player will agree to something a little more limited, but if neither side gives, write the disputed fact on a piece of scratch paper, then continue discussing facts for this character.

Once the group has decided "this is enough detail for this character", count up the number of disputed facts; each player, including the gamemaster, rolls that many ten-sided dice. For each player, if any of the dice comes up even and doesn't match any of that player's other dice results, discard that die. The rest of the dice – odd dice results and dice that match – count as the number of successes that player gets in this Dispute Roll.

The player can spend these successes as votes in support of a disputed fact or the negation of that disputed fact. For every disputed fact, if it has more votes in favor than votes against, it gets recorded on the NPC's sheet. If not, the disputed fact is discarded.

EXAMPLE: Abby, Betty, Carla, and Donna are players; Eddie is the gamemaster.

Eddie frames the scene: "Baron Gram, lord of Villegard, is hosting a tourney at his manor. The Baron himself rides in several of the events and demonstrates his master horsemanship." Eddie clarifies, when asked, that he's adding the following facts to Baron Gram: Baron, owns a manor, master horseman. No one objects to this, but Abby suggests an addition to the baron: "The baron's knights are so amazed at his horsemanship because of the baron's crippled right hand, injured in a past campaign."

Eddie accepts the implied "war veteran" as a fact, but disagrees with "crippled right hand". "That's too severe, I want him to be able to fight from horseback with lance and shield." Betty suggests "scarred hand" as a modification. Abby asks, "Will you accept that his scarred hand occasionally causes him pain?" Eddie accepts; Baron Gram gets five facts.

Abby introduces her Ally, Bertrand de Blanc, a clergyman, who has counseled a young woman without realizing she was a dragon in human form. "Bertrand is present at the tourney, of course, since, as the Baron's confessor, he is expected to attend court functions. However, Bertrand is paying little attention to the games; he is reading a letter from the bishop, an old friend from the seminary." Abby suggests this gives these facts: Baron's confessor, literate, friend of bishop, attended seminary. Eddie interjects, "let's not do `literate', because priests are the main literate group, anyways; I can't see giving a bonus for that."

"What about the confessor part?" Abby asks. Eddie has no objections, because the baron should have a confessor, and he has no one planned for the part.

Eddie adds: "The bishop's letter is a warning: he has heard rumors (no doubt false) that Bertrand has fallen into the devil's party." He wants to add "suspected as Satanist" as a fact. Abbie objects to this. Betty suggests changing this to "warned of danger" and make the bishop concerned about Bertrand's well being. Eddie doesn't accept this, so both of these get listed as disputed facts.

Carla adds another fact, "known for his healing skills", claiming it, too, could be mentioned in the letter. Eddie thinks this contradicts the setting, because only dragons have supernatural power in **Serpentine Thunder;** Carla clarifies that she means knowledge of herbs and poultices. Eddie agrees this won't be a contradiction, but challenges anyways. That gives Bertrand three disputed facts; everyone rolls three dice and bids their successes on whichever facts they prefer. "Warned of danger" and "healing arts" get the votes and are recorded as facts.

Some NPCs are going to have several facts recorded on their sheet. This happens when the players feel that character is particularly interesting and important to the story. Other NPCs are just bit players and will only have one or two facts ("oh, there's a blacksmith in town, he owns a crossbow.") If you can't think of any details you want to add to an NPC, then don't worry about it; don't add details to that NPC.

This entire phase of play should flow as if you were describing a Late Medieval/early Renaissance village or town and its typical inhabitants; it's technically the first scene. Not all the named NPCs need to be introduced in this first scene, but each player, including the gamemaster, should have at least one opportunity to introduce an NPC in this scene before shifting to another scene. It's probably best to start with the gamemaster, who adds the first NPC and frames the scene, then continue around the table. After everyone has had an opportunity to add an NPC to the scene or pass, the gamemaster can either add another NPC or pass on the second go-round; NPC creation in the first scene ends when everyone has passed or someone introduces a conflict.

Conflict Rolls

Any player with an Ally in the scene or who chooses to enter the dragon character into the scene can introduce conflict; likewise, the gamemaster can introduce conflict between an NPC and any dragon Ally currently in the scene. Once this happens, the game has moved into normal play; players may add new NPCs from time to time, frame new scenes, or use Dispute Rolls, but the emphasis will be on **Conflict Rolls**.

A Conflict begins with a "free and clear" stage during which the players and the gamemaster state what they are planning to do and what they hope to accomplish. They can change their plans after hearing anyone else's plans, but it can't change once dice are rolled.

During "free and clear", either players or the gamemaster can claim that a specific fact helps their side or hinders the other. If there is a disagreement on whether any facts apply to the conflict, handle it as a Dispute Roll first. Once all the facts are agreed upon or affirmed during a Dispute Roll, each fact either adds one die or deducts one die from the Conflict Roll.

The gamemaster and each player start with five dice each, plus or minus dice from facts, plus extra dice from any specific scores that apply (such as a dragon attempting to sneak past a town guard using Shadow or Glamour.) Once the total number of dice are known, roll and count successes, using the same method as for Dispute Rolls; however, in a Conflict Roll, the number on each dice matters, because it indicates when actions happen. All of the 1s are counted first; players can apply their successes to do damage (physical, social, emotional, or whatever kind of damage is appropriate.) Players can also use successes to maneuver for further advantages (move to higher ground, aim, steel yourself for a tough argument, run) or roll the successes over for more dice on the next roll.

After the 1s are resolved, the 2s are resolved next. What the player can spend these successes on can be limited by what has already happened, but is otherwise the same as resolving the 1s. Do the same for each number, in order.

EXAMPLE: Abby's dragon, Wyrmtongue, is attempting to contact her Ally, Father Bertrand, without being noticed by the guards. Wyrmtongue is in the form of a young woman, whom Bertrand thinks is a witch, but has been trying to lead her gently back to the faith. Bertrand is in the Baron's manor, and Eddie the gamemaster states that the guards are extra vigilant because of a recent attempt on the Baron's life (one of the other dragons was trying to scare the Baron away from his lair.) There are two guards present.

Abby states Wyrmtongue is using Glamour and natural stealth rather than Shadow, because she doesn't want to appear to Bertrand as if from nowhere. Wyrmtongue is going to disguise herself as a guard in case natural stealth fails and the guards spot her.

Abby is rolling 5 dice + 3 for Glamour, 8 dice total. The guards are just guards; no facts were introduced except "extra vigilant", which adds 1 die, plus they are considered experts, so Eddie rolls 5 dice base + 1 for "extra vigilant" + 2 for the village's Expertise, also 8 dice total.

Abby rolls 6, 5, 5, 0, 5, 1, 1, 1; Eddie rolls 4, 0, 1, 8, 0, 7, 9, 7. Taking each number in order:

0s: Abby gets one 0, so it is discarded. Eddie gets two 0s; he spends one success on spotting Wyrmtongue, and one success to "damage" Wyrmtongue's 3-point Glamour. He narrates "the guards spot this strange guard and realize they've never seen him before. They call for him to halt."

> **1s**: Abby gets three, Eddie gets one; all count, since 1s are odd. Eddie does another point of damage to Wyrmtongue's disguise, but Abby puts two successes back into the disguise and uses the extra success to lie to the guards. "I have come to relieve you. The Baron would like you to join him in the great hall."

> **4s**: Eddie gets one, but it is discarded, since 4s are even and only count if there is more than one.

> **5s**: Abby gets three successes, Eddy gets none. Since the guards' Expertise 2 would cover "never leaving your post", Abby spends her three successes as damage to both of the guards' sense of duty. One leaves to join the Baron in the great hall; one guard remains with a sense of duty of 1.

> **6s**: Abby gets one, but it is discarded, since 6s are even and only count if there is more than one.

> **7s**: Eddie gets two 7s. He puts both successes into damage against Wyrmtongue's Glamour, dropping it to 1 again.

> **8s**: Eddie gets one, but it is discarded, since 8s are even and only count if there is more than one.

9s: Eddie gets one, which counts, since 9s are odd. The guard sees through the magical disguise (although he can't tell that Wyrmtongue is a dragon, because that is Shapeshift, not Glamour.) "You're that witch I saw with Father Bertrand!" the guard hisses.

On the next turn, the guard will probably call for help and draw his sword, then attack. Abby will hope to get a success before Eddy does, so she can drop the guard's "sense of duty" to 0 and at least prevent him from calling for help (Wyrmtongue could probably take him in a fight.)

Hit Points

Note that in our Wyrmtongue versus the guard example, Abby "damaged" the guards' sense of duty, while Eddy damaged Abby's magical disguise. This is the general way to accomplish actions in **Serpentine Thunder**; assign "hit points" to what you want to do, then use successes as "damage"; when damage exceeds hit points, the action succeeds.

There are three ways to determine hit points for a goal:

1. if the goal is covered by one of the scores for your target, such as Expertise for the guard's sense of duty or Glamour for the dragon's disguise, the hit points are equal to that score by default;
2. if a player wants a better Glamour, tougher guards, or something like that, the player can opt to roll for the creation beforehand, putting successes into the hit points for that creation;
3. if the goal's target does not have any relevant scores (lifting a heavy boulder you plan to throw, crossing a raging river,) it's just one or more facts.

For method #2, there is always the risk that you won't get as many successes as you would have if you had accepted the default score. For method #3, th players and gamemaster discuss how many facts they think the goal should require, perhaps disputing some of the facts.

EXAMPLE: Carla's Ally, Jacinda the washerwoman, has lost her lady's dress in the river; it drifts downstream and gets snagged on a rock. Carla states that Jacinda dives into the river, swims to the rock, and retrieves the dress, for three facts. Eddie says he'll allow diving in as automatic, but swimming the river requires overcoming its "hit points", and he claims three hit points: one for Carla's fact "swim the river", one for "fight the

current", and one for "swim back". "Retrieve the dress" is a separate one-point task. If Carla doesn't dispute this, this becomes a Conflict Roll; if she does, there is a Dispute Roll first.

In the case of struggling inanimate objects and forces, like swimming the river or retrieving a dress, players always have the option of skipping a Conflict Roll and handling it only by a Dispute Roll... or no roll at all, if no facts are disputed. In most cases involving no struggle between people (or dragons,) no roll is the best and first choice; if there is a disagreement, choose a Dispute Roll next; if a player or the gamemaster thinks this is an important conflict in the story, then resolve it with a Conflict Roll.

Special Actions and Rolls

Several situations are resolved in special ways during a conflict. Those special situations are: Effects of Cold Weather; Wounding Dragons; Damaging Armor, Walls, or Scales; Using Up Hoard; Gaining Allies; Losing Allies; Leaping or Using Wings; Raising an Army or Finding Experts; Archers; Guns; Canon; Bombs; Breath Attacks; Fire; Corrosion; Poisonous Breath and Sting; Venom; Shadow, Glamour and Shapeshift.

Effects of Cold Weather: as mentioned in the section on draconic features, dragons are susceptible to cold weather; when in a cold environment, they are sluggish and feel sleepy and suffer a cold penalty on all actions. The penalty is negated if they are in a warm environment, even if it is currently winter.

The year is divided into eight semi-seasons: early spring, mid-spring, early summer, mid-summer, early autumn, mid-autumn, early winter, and mid-winter. Mid-spring and early autumn are considered normal weather; the other semi-seasons give dice for special "weather rolls" that players or the gamemaster can call for to change the current weather:

> mid-autumn, early spring: 1 bonus die for gamemaster
>
> early and mid-winter: 2 bonus dice for gamemaster
>
> mid-spring, early autumn: 1 bonus die for players
>
> early and mid-summer: 2 bonus dice for platers

Weather rolls are treated like Disputed Rolls. The gamemaster says "The weather should get colder today" or the players say "It should warm up today"; each side rolls 1 die, plus the bonus dice for the semi-season; if the village has a Winter score, add that to the number of dice for the gamemaster in the winter and add it to the players' dice in the summer. The dice are rolled; each player success cancels out one gamemaster success, then whoever still has successes wins and can move the cold weather penalty one step in whichever direction they prefer.

Dragons have to deduct the cold weather penalty from their Conflict Rolls. Humans (Allies or NPCs) are unaffected by cold weather. If the weather is warm, there is no penalty for anyone, but the gamemaster has to reduce the warm weather to zero one step at a time before it turns into a cold weather penalty.

Wounding Dragons: although human hit points is determined the same way hit points in general are determined, dragons do not have hit points; instead they take Wounds, which

act as a penalty in the same way cold weather does, but only on physical actions. Allies, Hoard, Glamour, Shadow, and Shapeshift are unaffected by wounds. Passive effects, such as the defense value of Scales, are also unaffected. If a dragon's wounds leave it unable to act (no dice to roll) and the dragon is attacked, a single point of damage that makes it past Scales will kill it.

Damaging Armor, Walls, or Scales: damage to a target protected by Armor or Scales, or behind a Wall, must first overcome the Armor, Scales, or Wall score; any excess points are removed from hit points. If an attacker wishes to destroy the protection, don't apply the excess points to the target's hit points; apply them to the Armor's hit points instead. Once the hit points reach zero, there is a breach in the protection; an attacker can spend one point to aim at the breach, thus bypassing protection completely. Fire, however, will completely destroy leather or cloth armor instead of merely breaching it; acid or corrosive dragon breath will likewise completely destroy metal armor.

Using Up Hoard: Hoard dice can be added to a dragon's dice pool to bribe or win over a human; however, the Hoard bonus is handled a little differently than other bonuses: the player declares how many Hoard dice she is using. After the Conflict Roll, the player and the gamemaster make a Dispute Roll, with the player rolling the full Hoard score and the gamemaster rolling the number of dice the player risked. If the gamemaster's successes exceed the player's successes, the Hoard is reduced by one point permanently.

Gaining Allies: players can introduce new NPCs into the game as facts at any time, possibly requiring a Dispute Roll. The Ally's base hit points and skills equal the dragon's Allies score, unless the player opts to search for an ally using a Conflict Roll. The player rolls 5 dice + Allies + any other bonuses involved; the gamemaster rolls 5 dice + appropriate bonuses; the player spends successes either on facts to counteract the gamemaster's actions or on the Ally's score, while the gamemaster spends successes to reduce the potential Ally's score or to perform other actions. If the ally's base score ends positive, the player adds that Ally.

Losing Allies: the Allies score represents the dragon's influence among humans, rather than the number of allies, but losing named allies can threaten the Ally score, especially if the Ally lost had a higher base score than the dragon's Allies score. Any time an Ally dies, flees, or betrays the dragon, make a Dispute Roll: the player rolls dice equal to Allies, the gamemaster rolls dice equal to the lost Ally's base score. If the gamemaster's successes exceed the player's successes, the Allies score is reduced by one point permanently.

Named Allies that already exist when the dragon's score drops do not adjust their scores downwards.

Raising an Army or Finding Experts: the gamemaster can acquire knights, mercenaries, or experts of various kinds in the same way that players can gain new Allies, but substituting Knights, Trade, or Expertise in place of the Allies score. If knights, mercenaries, or experts are lost, the gamemaster does *not* test the village's scores in the same way that players test their Allies score. Village scores only decrease through the depopulation mechanic described later.

Leaping or Using Wings: when a dragon leaps in the air, the player can put Conflict Roll successes into the Leap and record them in some way on the index card labeled LEAP. Players can't put more successes into that Leap than their Leap score. On each subsequent Conflict Roll, the dragon remains in the air, slowly falling; the Leap loses one point. When it reaches zero, the dragon has landed.

If a dragon does not have Wings, it must land before adding successes to Leap again; also, it can't change direction in mid-leap. A winged dragon, on the other hand, can add Wings dice to subsequent Conflict Rolls and rebuild the Leap back up to the Leap score maximum, or roll successes into maneuvering in mid-leap. To leap over a wall, the dragon must have a Leap score higher than the village's Walls score.

Guns: guns give humans an advantage because they can be fired from outside a dragon's breath range; furthermore, anyone can be trained to use a gun in a basic fashion, although expert gunners have an advantage. Guns, however, can only be made in villages with a Metalworking score of 1 or higher or by an expert blacksmith, while gunpowder can only be made by an expert chemist or in a village with Craft 1 or higher. If the village can't build a gun or the gunpowder needed, they can use Trade to attempt to purchase it from another village.

Players do get one special "attack" against guns, however: guns are still risky, dangerous things in this time period, so players can apply successes to the "gun explodes" goal, with hit points equal to the quality of the gun (default is Metalworking or the blacksmith's Expertise.) If a gun explodes, make a Dispute Roll, with each side rolling Craft + Metalworking to determine the damage.

Canons are really big guns. They function in mostly the same way, except that they have an extra Size score, which does not default, but is decided by a Dispute Roll. Each side rolls a number of dice equal to the Size of canon the village is attempting to purchase or build; if the gamemaster loses the dispute, the canon is the smallest size and does the same damage as a gun; if the gamemaster wins, the extra successes determine the Size, which adds to the damage done. Size also adds to the damage done by an exploding canon.

Archers: the longbow can do as much damage as a gun and has the advantage of not exploding, but it cannot be used except by an expert archer.

Bombs: bombs are gunpowder packed into a clay pot or other container. All that matters is the Craft score for making a bomb. Larger bombs can be made; use the Size rules for canons to determine damage. The disadvantage of a bomb is that it must be placed manually – risky, when attacking a dragon – or thrown from within the same range as a dragon's breath weapon.

Breath Attacks: breath attacks move towards their target somewhat slowly and can thus be dodged, unlike the effects of dragon's breath when close enough to touch the dragon. When a dragon belches forth its breath attack, the player puts successes onto an index card labeled BREATH. On the next Conflict Roll, the gamemaster compares successes to the Breath rating; if the gamemaster wins, the NPC dodges, otherwise, the breath attack strikes the target.

If there are multiple targets, each target needs enough successes to beat the Breath rating on the index card.

Fire: if a dragon with fiery Breath attacks a flammable target and exceeds its hit points, it catches fire and the excess damage becomes the intensity of the blaze. The player records the intensity on an index card labeled FIRE. On the following Conflict Roll, the player can roll extra dice equal to the intensity of the fire and use successes to build the fire's intensity. If the fire intensity exceeds the Armor score of flammable armor, it damages the armor as described previously. People engulfed in flame take damage equal to the flame's intensity (reduced by armor) on every Conflict Roll until the fire is extinguished.

Corrosion: acid and corrosive Breath works like fiery Breath against metal armor until the acid is wiped off in some way.

Poisonous Breath: any NPC that breathes a poisonous cloud is damaged directly, without any armor reduction. Poisonous clouds dissipate over time; use the same method as for a Leap.

Sting: a poisonous sting, unlike poisonous Breath, paralyzes the victim. The player records successes on an index card labeled STING; the victim is unable to move or attack until the paralysis wears off. Use the same method as used for the decay of a Leap to determine when it wears off.

Venom: a poisonous bite damages its victim every six hours (in other words, at dawn, noon, dusk, and midnight) until it dissipates, using the same method as for Leap.

Shadow, Glamour and Shapeshift: the "magical" abilities of a dragon can be "seen through" by any NPC who overcomes the strength of the effect, but the effect itself persists until the dragon ends it or dies. The only way to counteract these magical effects is for a priest (Expert) to damage the effect through appeal to a higher power.

Shadow allows the dragon to pass through material objects and hide inside walls. Glamour effects can be created at a distance as long as the dragon is not in human or other shapeshifted form.

Shapeshift 0 allows dragons to take human form, but Shapeshift 1+ allows the dragon to take animal forms, tree forms, or even invent fantastic forms like demons, unicorns, or giants. When inventing a new form, the player describes the potential powers of that form as facts (which can be disputed;) the player can then assign a number of dice equal to Shapeshift to each power to give it a rating.

Playing the Game

The rules so far have covered all the details of actions taken in conflicts and how to resolve them, but how do you actually play **Serpentine Thunder**? What do the players do, and what does the gamemaster do?

What the players do will depend on what the dragon's attitude towards humans is. A player who has chosen the attitude "Harm Humans Openly" intends open warfare on humanity, which will probably be answered with gunfire. "Heal Humans Secretly" is a different response entirely; the dragon is perhaps repentant about past draconic oppression and aims to avoid death by changing minds, one at a time. Other dragons may attempt escape or intrigue; dragons may even be opposed to each other.

The gamemaster's task is to guess what the dragons attitudes are by their actions and provide appropriate challenges. If the dragon is attacking, the gamemaster can tempt with friendly humans, or raise an army. Individual villages may be somewhat weak compared to dragons, but they make up for this with *numbers*, and with firm resolve once people start dying.

Earlier, there was a brief mention of an index card labeled SLAIN. Every time a dragon kills an NPC in a way that can be traced to dragons (or something unhuman, at the least,) the gamemaster adds one token to SLAIN. As the bodies pile up, the village can call upon the memories of the slain to strengthen their resolve; the gamemaster can take tokens from SLAIN to use as one-time only bonus dice.

SLAIN can only be erased two ways: fleeing the village (which requires damaging SLAIN, which has hit points equal to the current number of tokens,) or destroying the village. For purposes of destruction, the village has armor equal to its Walls and hit points equal to its total dice assigned to features (Craft, Metalworking, and so on.) Every time a draconic attack overcomes the Walls, the excess points are done as damage to the village's hit points. To heal damage, the gamemaster must use SLAIN tokens. When the village damage equals hit points, the village is destroyed.

The village could use its Trade score to contact another village for assistance, using the earned successes to set the scores for the second village. The gamemaster could then combine the village resources to face the draconic threat. Each village gets its own SLAIN count and its own hit points for destruction purposes.

Both dragons and villages can be improved. When a player in some way eliminates a named NPC or converts the NPC to an Ally, the player can select one draconic feature and make a Dispute Roll, using facts representing why that score should be improved. Both the gamemaster's dice and the player's dice start at a base equal to the selected score plus the number of facts. If the player wins, the score goes up one point. Villages use the same process to improve, but the trigger for improvement is the elimination or conversion of an NPC or dragon. Elimination for either case can be interpreted broadly.

Afterword

Serpentine Thunder was created as part of the November 24-Hour Ronnies competition. Out of four possible terms, I chose Dragon and Gun to focus the game around. The game was completed on Wednesday, November 9th, 2005.