



# DAEDALUS

Editorial workshop for the role-playing hobby

FEATURE STORY

## HeroQuest unbound!

Q&A with Greg Stafford, page 3  
by Matt Snyder

PLUS

Redeeming Thed,  
goddess of rape, page 10  
by Ron Edwards

The power of myth, page 18  
by Chris Chinn

### Daedalus

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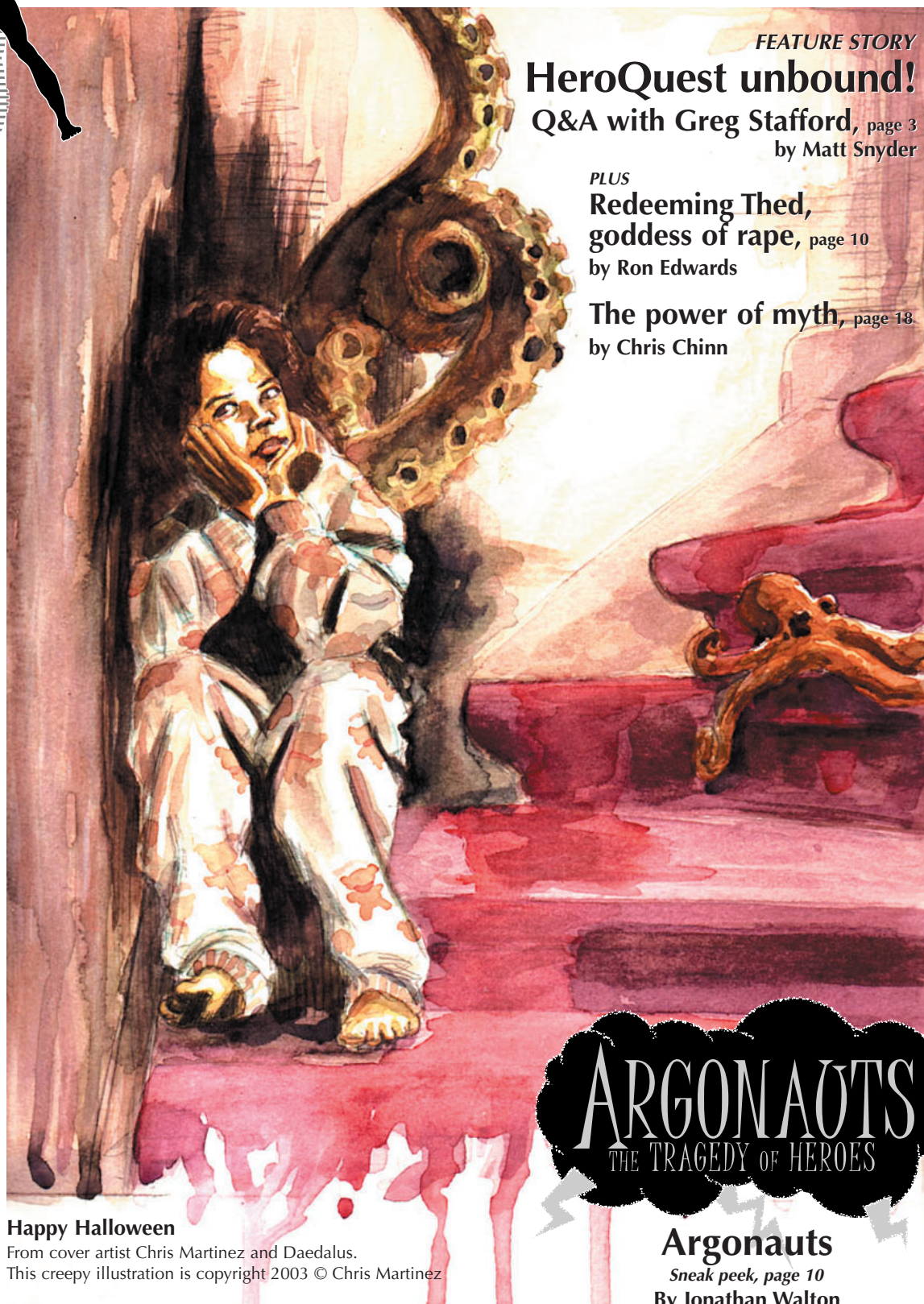
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### Happy Halloween

From cover artist Chris Martinez and Daedalus.  
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ARGONAUTS  
THE TRAGEDY OF HEROES

### Argonauts

Sneak peek, page 10  
By Jonathan Walton



## We want to hear from you!

Daedalus wants to hear what you think about the inaugural issue. Please send an email if you would like to comment on the e-zine or any of the articles. Daedalus will feature select letters on this page in future issues.

## Looking for articles, artwork for Winter 2004

Daedalus is looking for contributors for the winter 2004 issue. If you would like to write an article, showcase a game, review a game, or provide artwork for the upcoming issue, please contact editor Matt Snyder: [matt@chimera.info](mailto:matt@chimera.info). The Winter 2004 feature will be cyberpunk and science fiction in role-playing games. The deadline for contributions is December 31, 2003.

## Please donate

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## Advertise

Game publishers, please contact Daedalus Editor Matt Snyder ([matt@chimera.info](mailto:matt@chimera.info)) for information about ads for your game or product in this e-zine.

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### FROM THE EDITOR

## What I want to be when I grow up

Three months ago I decided it was high time I grew up. I have spent many, many hours playing role-playing games, reading role-playing game books, participating in online discussion groups like the Forge and RPG.net, talking with my friends and fellow gamers, and even designing my own games. I'm passionate about role-playing games, and I decided its time to give something back to the role-playing community.

This e-zine, DAEDALUS, is my effort to do just that, to give something back to the role-playing hobby and hopefully to do a little growing up in the process.

I have some pretty strong opinions about this hobby, and especially the industry. Hopefully, I'm also wise enough not to let that confound what DAEDALUS can be for you, the reader.

What is DAEDALUS? It is an editorial workshop and forum, a crossroads where designers, writers, and readers can come to think critically and seriously bout their beloved hobby. And let's not forget that this hobby is about having fun. My mission with this publication is to help people have more fun with their hobby.

So, three months have passed, and here I am on the eve of the inaugural issue's release. It's been a lot of work. Fortunately, I had a number of role-playing enthusiasts who agreed to go along for the ride. And what a ride it's been. I'm proud of DAEDALUS, and I hope that DAEDALUS shows it.

Welcome to the first issue of DAEDALUS. Long may we run. Ω



Matt Snyder







# HeroQuest revives Glorantha legacy

Creator Greg Stafford explains the evolution of his world

By Matt Snyder

Daedalus Editor



## About Greg Stafford

Greg Stafford began publishing games in 1974 as a founder of Chaosium. He has created numerable role-playing games, including RuneQuest, Pendragon, Prince Valiant, Hero Wars and his newest game, HeroQuest. Stafford was born in 1948, is married to Suzanne Courteau, and has three children: Noah, Alisha, and Jason.



Learn more about HeroQuest and Glorantha online:  
[www.glorantha.com](http://www.glorantha.com)

In the history of role-playing games, there have been a few imaginative places that have truly stood the test of time. Like aging siblings, legacy game-related settings like Greyhawk, Tekumel, and Glorantha have become the grandfathers and great uncles of fantasy role-playing games.

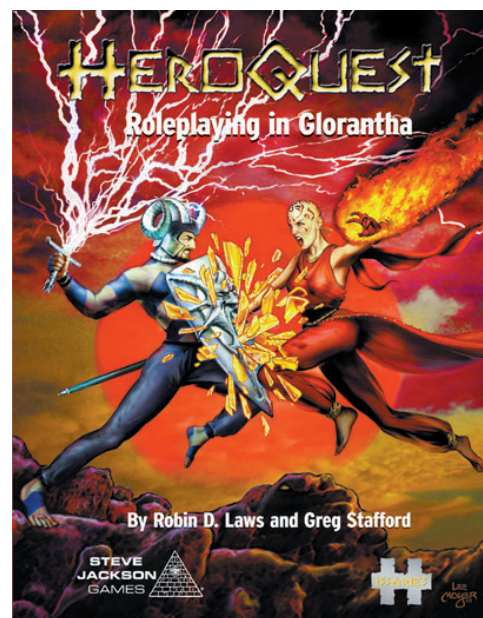
Greyhawk is, of course, the long-lasting realm in which countless *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures have taken place. With the release of the third edition of *Dungeons & Dragons*, Greyhawk became the “default” setting, and it has been recast and rekindled as a fan favorite.

Tekumel, that baroque, bizarre realm world imagined in games and writings by M.A.R. Barker, persists in an online site ([www.tekumel.com](http://www.tekumel.com)) and in the hearts and minds of dedicated fans and collectors. And, Guardians of Order promises a new Tekumel role-playing game in December 2003.

And then there is Glorantha. It is the creation of Greg Stafford, a living legend of the role-playing game community. Glorantha began, in the public eye, with the release of the board game *White Bear, Red Moon* in 1975. Stafford explains Glorantha existed well before that in his writings and imagination.

After another board game called *Nomad Gods*, Glorantha became the setting for fantasy role-playing game *RuneQuest*. *RuneQuest* was a very popular game for a young hobby. The game developed a fan base that continues to play the game today, despite the fact that the 3rd edition of the game was published in 1985.

In 1998, Stafford split from Chaosium, with whom he published *RuneQuest* and other remarkable games like *Pendragon* and *Prince Valiant*, as well as working on classics like *Call of Cthulhu* and *Thieves World*. He formed Issaries, Inc., and put together the publication of



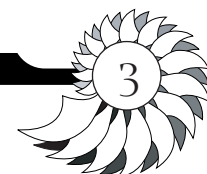
This year, Issaries, Inc., published *HeroQuest*, a revitalized edition for Gloranthan role-playing. Issaries reached an agreement with Steve Jackson Games to distribute *HeroQuest*, and it is available online at:

[www.warehouse23.com/item.cgi?ISS1001](http://www.warehouse23.com/item.cgi?ISS1001)

a new game set in Glorantha called *Hero Wars*.

*Hero Wars* experienced problems in production, and the product was difficult to read and use. However, it contained an innovative system, designed by Robin Laws, that broadened the scope and story of Glorantha. The game developed a dedicated following of fans, and it changed the way players interacted with Glorantha, urging more mythic stories and heroic struggles.

*HeroQuest* is an outstanding game. It employs a single, simple mechanic to model conflicts of all kinds. The system scales beautifully, allowing conflicts among everything from peas-





ants to demigods. The game emphasizes the value of community and relationships more so than the might of a solitary hero as other fantasy games so often do. Characters can overcome challenges using their personal relationships in exactly the same way as they would use their own ability with a sword. This emphasis on community and truly makes the game and its well-developed world shine. The result

is a game system that practically begs players to craft powerful, meaningful myths on their own.

In short, *HeroQuest* is a milemarker for roleplaying games. Greg Stafford and company have, at long last, achieved a great accomplishment with the game. It is one that will hopefully encourage years of enjoyment among gamers and one that inspires future designs to live up to its legacy.

### Glorantha realized

Greg Stafford agreed to answer some questions from DAEDALUS to shed some light on the creation myth of Glorantha and *HeroQuest*.

**Q:** *I understand HeroQuest is, for you, the ultimate realization of Glorantha?*

**A:** Perhaps not the “ultimate,” but certainly the best to date.

**Q:** *Can you explain what about this specific game really makes it all “come home” for you?*

**A:** I’ve been writing about Glorantha since 1966. I’ve been making games set there since 1975. I’ve made or helped to make two board games, two roleplaying games and a computer game set here. During that time it has always been a growing thing, and each game has helped to clarify Glorantha for me. That is, it’s an ongoing process where I learn something new about the word and attempt to put it into shape as a game.

Then the game provokes all kinds of com-

ments from other people that in turn cause me to consider, reconsider and discover new things. Thus, this game is the culmination of 28 years of creativity. It has been fun, but also hard work. I

spent almost a whole year doing little else but write *HeroQuest*, but as a result I feel it really does bring it home this time. I feel like *HeroQuest* captures the vision, the color and the excitement of Glorantha in a

form that is the most accessible yet. Robin Laws created a slick and dynamic system that makes storytelling more important than rules lawyering, so Glorantha is now quite accessible.

**Q:** *Has Glorantha changed in its latest iteration? How so?*

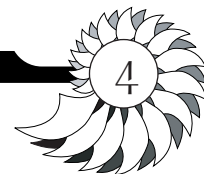
**A:** Glorantha has always been changing. However, I don’t feel that it has changed radically. With each game I’ve just added more detail and interesting depth.

But, this time some changes feel larger than others. For instance, this is the first time that I’ve had the clarity of vision to definitely state that the three Otherworlds of magic are absolutely separate from each other, except where they overlap in the human world. But the lands and peoples have remained essentially the same from the first game, the gods and goddesses are the same and so on.

**Q:** *Where is Glorantha going from here?*

**A:** To the End of the World. I have always had a perception that I wanted to create the world, show how it worked, crank it up and then send the machine towards its logical end, which is the self destruction that precedes a new creation. *HeroQuest* is the game for it. It shows how the world is, sets the mechanics to make it work and also provides the tools to break it. So Glorantha is going to end.

**“I wanted to create the world, show how it worked, crank it up and then send the machine towards its logical end ... *HeroQuest* is the game for it.”**





## Reaching out

**Q:** *Who is the primary target audience of this game? Is it existing Glorantha fans, or do you aim to capture new fans? What is Issaries marketing target, and how does the game strive to that goal?*

**A:** This is aimed at new comers. I am really happy that I've finally managed to make the depth and complexity of Glorantha into a feature instead of a bug. This game is designed from the ground up to be accessible to newbies. It always bugged me no end that people were intimidated by the game and the world. So this time I wrote it so that everything needed to play was concise and simple and made it clear that playing the game would reveal other things, but all you need to start is right there.

So, a new player really has to read two pages to make a new character. Since the game is based on verbal storytelling with a very simple rule system it's easy to get into without reading a hundred pages of complex rules.

**Q:** *How well do you think HeroQuest serves people new to Glorantha?*

**A:** Very well. It has a simple rule system and is written to start small and go larger if you wish. It stresses "This is all you need to know." The new comers I have communicated with have found it to be so.

**Q:** *Do you think the dizzying amount of material and even things like potentially confusing game titles are an obstacle for them?*

**A:** No, not if they actually look at what is there. Think of it this way. Does a couple of million books about World War II make it harder for someone to learn to play their first war game? Not if the game is simple! Same for Glorantha. Ignore whatever you don't know, take what is there and play.

**Q:** *What can you suggest to these people as the best way to "getting into" the game?*

**A:** Start small. Not even the Narrator has to know everything about the world. No one has to know all the gods, cults and magical spells. Just use what you need. And the narrator needs to always remember the



Darra Happans, members of the Lunar Empire

two main principles of the game:

**YGWV:** Your Glorantha Will Vary. Even I don't know everything, so be confident that whatever you want to make up is OK; and

**MGF:** Maximum Game Fun. If there is a conflict between a "known fact" and fun, then go for the fun!

By the way, neither of these abbreviations were made up by me. I got them off the lists.

**Q:** *What about people who've loved Glorantha for years—how does the game serve them? Do they lose anything in this edition?*

**A:** I don't think so. Most of the comments that I have heard in person or read on the





lists are extremely positive. Most of them express satisfaction that so many of their previous questions have been answered. The only thing lost is a lot of dizzying detail for such odious things as hours-long hand-to-hand combat and limitless spell lists. But now we have a good presentation of what HeroQuesting is and how it works. People can take their characters into the worlds of the gods and spirits now, and participate in the great myths.

### Issaries' stance on third-party publishing

**Q:** *I recently read a post describing the HeroQuest rules as "narrative GURPS," meaning that it is a fantastic rules set for creating stories of many kinds, Glorantha or otherwise.*

**A:** Thank you. We feel the same.

**Q:** *So, I'm interested in hearing what Issaries stance is on development of supplemental materials for HeroQuest. I see two prongs here: Gloranthan support materials (clearly, there's already a thriving Glorantha fan following) and non-Gloranthan materials. Can you explain your company's position on people creating supplemental material and/or conversions of the HeroQuest engine for other settings? Does Issaries support this? What about for-profit materials? Have you considered any kind of program or licensure for such development?*

**A:** As for Glorantha, we have a program underway to update known material and also, more excitingly, to publish a lot of new material about the unpublished regions of Glorantha. We are going to concentrate on expanding knowledge of the Lunar Empire first, but we are also preparing supplements for other regions of the world.

Fans have the liberty to do what they wish with their own games of course, and we support their publications as long as they are not for profit. We don't especially feel obligated to agree with fan publications, of course, but then, YGWV. That said, we often draw official material from the fan material. We urge anyone with a finished

manuscript to submit it to us first.

As for non-Gloranthan materials, we have some items in the long-term works that will take the game system and expand it to other settings. I think it's counter productive to talk about them in detail at this date. I have just too much experience of letting a single sentence slip out and then be plagued by people for years who want to see it and are so often disappointed when I haven't lived up to their desires. We are a small company and have a plan for the next couple of years to make sure that Glorantha is properly supported. Then we will see about the next stage.

As for licensing the system to someone else, we would be more than happy to entertain any offers. But we are a professional company, and we expect to work with professionals. But, I want to repeat: If someone has an idea or a new setting, contact us first!

We have no interest in doing an open license thing, either. And on that subject, let me say here that we have no plans to use the d20 license for Glorantha. Glorantha is bigger than d20. I would, frankly, licence it for the right amount, paid up front. But the number is such that I doubt anyone would want to pay it.

### Creating by collaboration

**Q:** *Glorantha is your creation, an yet it is obviously a world made by a number of people. Was there a point at which you had to "let go" and let others color the world and its myths, regardless of what they did fit some nascent vision you once held? How have you approached that over the years, and how has it shaped your own view of a world you created?*

**A:** It has been a struggle. Obviously I have and have had a lot invested in Glorantha, and I used to be horribly possessive about it. I regret my attitude from years ago where I turned off some very creative individuals and forfeited their contributions. But part of the appeal of Glorantha has always been its internal consistency, and I don't regret holding that vision.

One of the virtues of HeroQuest is that it really does set the frame, the macro-structure, to







such an extent that I am confident people will be able to work within it without me peering over their shoulders.

That said, it was only within the last decade that I really began to loosen up. My attitude used to be that everything had to match my preconceptions, and if I didn't have preconceptions then I'd spend time working those out, often to the detriment of potential contributors. It was as if, "If it isn't mine, it doesn't work."

There have always been exceptions, of course. Sandy Petersen was one person in particular who could perfectly anticipate my own vision. But I have changed that old attitude. I have always wanted Glorantha it to be a group effort, and so now I have converted to the practice that, "if it isn't wrong, it is ok."

### From Hero Wars to HeroQuest

**Q:** *How did the rules system emerge? That is, how did you work with Robin Laws to create this system for Hero Wars, and what input did you have on the design? I'm interested in the thought process and the objectives for creating this rules system as seen in Hero Wars and now HeroQuest.*

**A:** I struggled for years with *HeroQuest*. I wrote hundreds of pages, dozens of rules and systems to try to make it work. I never could. Finally I decided to try to find someone else to help out. Rob Heinsoo told me one day that Robin Laws was a Glorantha fan and I went right to him to ask for his input. I had admired Robin's skill for some

time, but didn't know he was a Glorantha fan. If I had I probably would have asked him to collaborate earlier. I was ecstatic when he agreed to do it.

We spent a lot of time in conversation and email with me outlining and detailing my ideas and needs, and with Robin asking his own questions, pumping me for details. He was astute in his questions, even bringing me to clarify things that I'd not considered. And he was absolutely sensitive to my desires. As a result he came out with a system that worked. He even did things that I insisted on that he didn't really want, like the edges and handicaps.

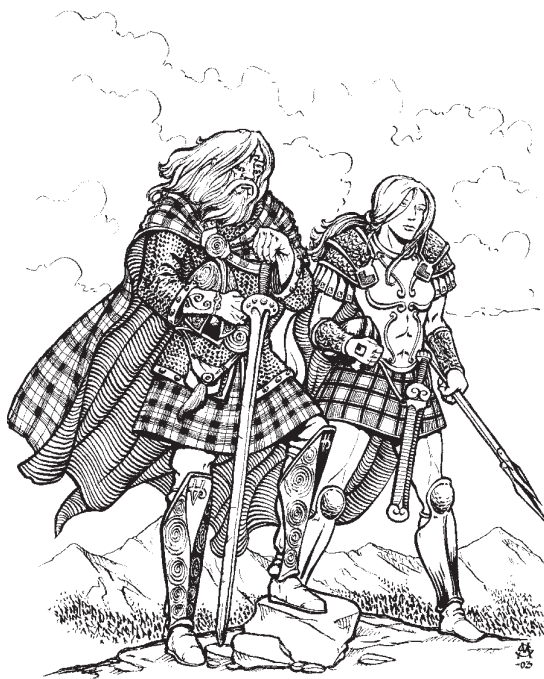
He submitted his manuscript on time. We tweaked the system a bit. For instance, Shannon Applecline

convinced me that the numbers in the original resolution system were backward, and so we reversed them. But most of the system remained intact. Then I began to fill in the details, ran out of money and published the then-current result as the incomplete game called *Hero Wars*.

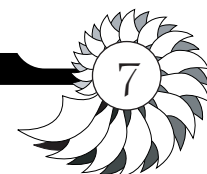
**Q:** *Incomplete? Care to explain what you mean by that?*

**A:** Sure. I'd been publishing games for decades as Chaosium, but we owners and debtors broke the company up in 1999 or so. I got what I had begun with: Glorantha and its products.

But I needed money to finish the game and publish it, so I asked the fans if they could help out to make the new game. They responded generously and I exceeded my mark of \$50,000. Well, that seems like a lot of money but it was really just a tad compared to what we needed.



Heortlings, free people and worshippers of Orlanth





It wasn't enough, so I reached the point where I had just enough money left to print the game up. I had a choice of either publishing it as it was or never doing it at all. Since I'd made a promise to the contributors to release a game I printed *Hero Wars*. I was never happy with the result. It was unprofessional, full of typos and misspellings. I always thought it was an embarrassment, and that my world and Robin's game system deserved better.

If I had had the assistance of my loyal sidekick Stephen Martin at that time it would have been much better, but he was busy having a baby and tending to his wife. Nonetheless, the established fans took to it, and it sold out. So, we could gather enough new funds in and work some more, then print the finished version that is *HeroQuest*.

**Q:** *What about in HeroQuest—what roles did you and Robin (and others?) play in terms of game system for this new iteration of the game?*

**A:** The biggest changes are in the presentation. *HeroQuest* makes it accessible, presented in digestible bites instead of a massive feast.

If there are faults, I take most of the blame for them. Robin had met his obligations and didn't do much for the new version, for *HeroQuest*. His contribution was and is the graceful game system and for asking the questions that brought out the details in Glorantha.

For the second version I'd been playing it for some time, and I had decided to take some of the confusing game system parts out, like edges and handicaps that I had originally insisted on. As I said, Robin had put them in at my insistence, but they were bad rules, just gumming up a sleek system. So now they are supplemental or optional rules.

Other people also helped to improve and finish the system and details. I am especially indebted to Stephen Martin, Mark Galeotti and Roderick Robertson who filled in spell and feat lists and so on. I also owe a huge debt to Jonathan Geere who oversaw the manuscript at a critical juncture and both made suggestions and filled in some details. And there is a host of others, whose credits are in the game. If I listed them all it would fill up a page.

**Q:** *What do you see as the most significant changes in HeroQuest versus Hero Wars in terms of system?*

**A:** The most significant changes are not really to the system at all, but to the way they are presented. The biggest change is that now the rules insist that people tell the narrator what they want to do, then the numbers are figured out. In *Hero Wars* the numbers came first, but that was awfully clumsy and got in the way of the story. I owe that insight to my friend Fergie who used to play in my game and say, "Look, Greg, I don't care about the numbers. I just want to jump on his head and push my spear through its eyes."

### Personal myths

**Q:** *How much of you is in this game? How much of your own philosophies have colored both Glorantha as a fantastic place, and HeroQuest as a workable game?*

**A:** I have been working on Glorantha for more than half my life, so of course it has a lot of me in it. It is my primary artistic expression. I love mythology, both as a subject of study and a personal practice, and so of course that is expressed in this game. But I don't try to use it as a propaganda tool for either politics or religion.

**Q:** *Are you making a statement with HeroQuest, and if so can you explain that?*

**A:** If I am making a statement it is that we are still beings with a mythological part deep within us. The modern Western world pretends that it fosters a superior way of thinking. It insists on a scientific, rational perspective and has dismissed spirituality and consciousness as being just superstition and primitive nonsense. This is of course bunk. I certainly believe in science and rationality, but don't believe that they hold the secrets of meaning that so many people seek. Except for health, science hasn't made people happier. Sure, it has given us computers, let us fly around the world and talk with each other on the internet. Big deal. Science hasn't done much to let







people learn more about each other, to find love, or to remove the barriers of fear, jealousy, and prejudice. Those are things that live within us all, and it is mythology and spirituality that can change us inside.

Of course, I am not promoting irrationality of blind belief, either. We must struggle to live with our need for both rationality and irrationality.

**“The game isn’t going to solve the terrors of life, fill someone with love, or help them find the right mate. It doesn’t teach magic. It just feeds our spirit.”**

**Q:** *Do you have any hope that what you’re “saying” with this game will have an effect on people who buy and play the game?*

**A:** I don’t really hope that the game will change people. That isn’t part of my program. I want to provide this game to have fun. I do believe that it provokes and feeds, in a positive way, the mythological selves that we all have. I also feel that feeding those parts of ourselves is a good thing. But the game isn’t going to solve the terrors of life, fill someone with love, or help them find the right mate. It doesn’t teach magic. It just feeds our spirit.

**Q:** *HeroQuest has a three-pronged approach to magic, and each is defined by worship or deification, even the type of magic labeled wizardry. While this may be more fitting considering the historical nature of magic and myth in actual cultures, it is contrary to the “secular” magic found so commonly in RPGs. Can you explain this a bit, and comment on why you’ve included no “secular magic?” Do you see it in any way as a “correction” for a hobby trend that demystified the nature of magic, ritual and worship in human history?*

**A:** Of course, it isn’t the hobby that has secularized the idea of magic. Everything in our Western way of life has done that and the majority of game designers don’t have real experience with magic, so they just mimic the “common knowledge”

and treat magic as if it was another technology. But it isn’t. Magic comes from the place where poetry and psychology meet, which is in our souls. I don’t try to proselytize with my games, but I do try to provide soul food, in the form of fun, creativity and group communication. So I guess you could say this is a sort of “correction” for the erroneous methodologies that are promoted in other games and in our culture at large.

#### Teacher’s pet

**Q:** *For you, and perhaps your own group, are there any particular regions or myths that you’ve found special affection for using the new game?*

**A:** I have always had affection for the stormy mythologies, but this is just a reflection of my own tumultuous spirit. That is, I think, the source of my long-standing development of the Heortlings, the Orlanth-worshipping people of Dragon Pass. At the same time I have developed a deep understanding for the reflective values that manage to reconcile the contradictions of life. This has come about more recently, hence the development of the multifaceted Lunar Empire. Nonetheless, all of the aspects of Glorantha are a part of my love of mythology in its many, many masks. I have deep attachments to all of it. If I had enough time I would eventually develop the subtleties, strengths and weaknesses of the rest of Glorantha as well. As it is, I am extremely happy to have the assistance of so many others who have had their own imaginations and creativity provoked to contribute to the world. I am happy to have such a team of people helping out. I am happy to have fed so many minds and spirits, and look forward to this continuing. Ω





# Redeeming Thed, Goddess of Rape

## A powerful account of one group's profound heroquest



**Article by  
Ron Edwards**

Ron Edwards is the owner of Adept Press, and he has published several role-playing games including *Sorcerer*, *Trollbabe*, and *Elfs*. Ron won the 2002 Diana Jones Award for his work in independent role-playing publishing and success with *Sorcerer*. He was also named Person of the Year in the 2002 Indie RPG Awards.

“Hello, my name is Ron Edwards, and I’m a rabid advocate for playing HeroQuest.” Everyone else: “Hi, Ron!” This article is intended to illustrate just what you can get from playing the game, and it’s pretty deep-end. HeroQuest isn’t about swinging swords and improving your character’s abilities, although that does happen. Playing this game is about

stuff, and the good news is that ultimately, what the stuff really means is up to you. What do you need to know, to read this article? Not much. The name of the setting is Glorantha, and there are lots of cultures involved. Gods and goddesses are a big deal, very much like what you’d find in reading *The Iliad*. This essay is about one of them: Thed, the Gloranthan goddess of rape.

In my role-playing group, during our very first discussion of the setting’s mythology and cultures, the other players’ initial reaction to this concept was probably similar to most people’s: “Whaaat? You must be kidding me.” I saw their point. It doesn’t sound good, does it? Especially the “of” part, which means what it sounds like—this goddess represents, facilitates, promotes, and rewards the act in question. To worship her is to perpetrate rape and its associated agony of all kinds. I was looking at my players, and they’re giving me that *No Freaking Way* look back. Now, years later, I’m writing this article to show that the Gloranthan setting is built to prompt these kinds of responses from people, and that *HeroQuest* has the guts, as a game, to take even such a difficult ball and run with it for some outstanding, uniquely powerful play. In many other games, such a response means, “Avoid this issue from now on.” In *HeroQuest*, it can mean, “Go there, now.”

So here we go, on a discourse about Thed. She isn’t a very powerful deity. Her primary

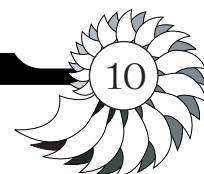
worshippers are the broo, or goatkin, a stock monster for the setting and arguably the most debased kindred ever invented for a fantasy-world. They propagate exclusively through rape, and they are cross-fertile with just about anything. The offspring may have features of the victim-parent, but it’s a broo, usually male, and usually riddled with “Chaos features” (i.e. magical muta-

tions) and diseases. They worship Thed in animistic terms as an ancestor-spirit, and probably through misapplied theistic worship as well, using all manner of sacrifice and vicious evil-doing as currency.

The broo are found in all published versions of Gloranthan role-playing. They’re always the same: humanoids with nearly-random animal features, although with a tendency toward goat-part; festering and stinking with diseases; displaying all sorts of deformities and wild magical features; and running around intent on rape and pain. On occasion, united by a shaman or the occasional debased human, they may be involved in more subtle plots, on the scale of “poison the village well” or “steal ten babes for sacrifice.” They’ll hire out as mercenaries, although their employer would certainly be ostracized by his or her other potential allies. Broo vileness shows up everywhere. Check out any edition of *RuneQuest* (The Chaosium 1977, 1978), and the supplements *Snakepipe Hollow*, *River of Cradles*, *The Big Rubble*, *Dorastor: Land of Doom*, and *Shadows on the Borderland*.

The role-playing source material on the mythos can be found in *Cults of Terror* (The Chaosium, 1981). Its text was recapitulated in the Avalon Hill publication *Lords of Terror* (1994) and also in the first three chapters of *Glorantha: Introduction to the Hero Wars*

# HEROQUEST





(Issaries, Inc., 2001). From the Thed section in *Cults of Terror*:

#### Before Time

Prior to the Lesser Darkness, Thed was an important goddess. She was the wife of Ragnaglar, who later was called the Mad God, and their children were the broos, then untainted by chaos. Together with Ragnaglar and Mallia, she schemed to introduce chaos into the world in the form of the Devil [*clarification: this is a slight misstatement; previous text establishes that chaos already existed in Glorantha before this event - RE*]. The three had found jealousy and pride in themselves, and they dreamed of usurping the functions of the world, and of becoming its unchallenged rulers. Thed herself was the mother of the Devil, and his malevolence twisted and distorted her in childbirth. She participated in the ways of Chaos and her broos aligned with her.

#### Since Time began

Though protected in her existence by the Great Compromise, Thed was on the losing side, and occupies a distinctly minor place in the vast pantheon of deities. It is probable that only her initial role as Mother of the Broos has been effective in maintaining her powers.

Regardless, she is overwhelmingly significant to Gloranthan mythology and magic. Thed is one of the main bad guys. She is the central member of the Unholy Trio, who in the cosmology, birthed the Devil to begin The Greater Darkness.

From the general section in *Cults of Terror* and repeated in the later texts listed above:

#### Cosmology

These murderers [*of Rashoran - RE*] were the Unholy Trio. Hatred, selfishness, greed, and jealousy motivated them. These short-sighted emotions are now considered to be symptoms of chaos in the world, and they were originated by the three, who concentrated their forces and wills to create something new.

The first of the trio was Ragnaglar, whom some called kin to Storm Bull, driven to hatred

by jealousy and dishonorable acts. The second was Thed, said to have been wife to Ragnaglar at one time. The third was Mallia, another goddess who had great properties to aid birth and growth. These three joined together and perverted their natures to make their weapon of hatred and vengeance.

The Unholy Trio made the end of the world. ... The product of the ritual was the Devil, the product of poisoned souls ... Wakboth the Devil is the moral evil of the world.

From *Lords of Terror* (in addition to the above text):

Wakboth's first act in the world was to slay his father, so that none could be born to rival him. He then forced Thed and the broos to aid him as he destroyed the world. Thed's willing submission to rape [I'll have more to say about this later -RE] provided him with other, more powerful, brothers and sisters, and these monsters served him as lieutenants or champions during the Darkness.

And from *Anaxial's Roster* (Issaries Inc, 2000):

#### Broo (goatkin)

Broo are humanoid, but have many animal features, especially those that derive from their mother. Ragnaglar, the broo ancestor, was goat-shaped . . .

... Thed, goddess of rape, is their favorite, for she was the mother of the first broo, after her violation by Ragnaglar, the Mad God.

All right, that's not too out of line for a villain deity, albeit a vile one. But, what's all this about "she"? How can a *female* figure play this kind of theistic role? On the face of it, the concept sounds frankly awful —mean-spirited, at the least, or insensitive to the issue, or all manner of similar things. Why not have the broo god be Ragnaglar, the rapist perpetrator? No, it's Thed—the goddess who was violated, including the birthing of the rapist's child, who itself proceeds on to further abuse. Not only the plain physical violation, but the trauma. A *goddess* who claims ownership of







rape. Is Gloranthan myth assigning the responsibility for rape to its victim?

Even worse, you can't ignore it. Thed is a major element of Glorantha, mythically speaking and also in terms of potential foes for role-playing; if you house-rule this stuff out of the setting, you leave behind gaping holes. Thed's actions gave a *face and intent* to Chaos (previously fairly neutral, if disturbing), and that intent necessitated the Great Compromise and the birth of Time. It set up the relationships between gods and mortals that define the theistic rules of Gloranthan role-playing, most especially those of *HeroQuest*.

### Close examination

Clearly there are some fuzzy areas in the texts quoted so far. For example, just to pick a detail, the origin of the broos' goat-ness is ascribed to both parent gods in *Anaxial's Roster*. When getting hip-deep into philosophical and cultural issues in Glorantha, the place to go is Greg Stafford's novel *King of Sartar: How one man became a god*, which is sort of a deconstructionist collection of after-the-fact documents about the events of the Hero Wars. My copy is from The Chaosium (1994); here's what it says. Bear in mind that every "document" in the collection is intended to reflect the writer's bias to an extreme degree.

[Orlanth and the other gods] had never thought that the very things that were good could be turned upon them.

Orlanth discovered that there was too much justice when the goddess named Thed came to his court, demanding her share of it. Orlanth granted it, of course, but regretted it when she revealed that she was the victim of his brother's aggression. He had overcome her and taken her by force against her will. She showed everyone her gaping wound, which had never healed, and demanded full recompense. Orlanth, of course, agreed, even though it brought him great shame. And Thed considered what would be the worst thing she could do to her enemy, and she said that she wanted to be the Goddess of Rape, so that Orlanth's own wife and daughters would fear the same thing forever. And they did. ...

And he was horrified to discover that even his most sacred progenitive urges could become vices. Orlanth's brother Ragnaglar was so overcome with sexuality that he had no limits to what he would take as a partner, and he was so fecund that everything he mated with bore children. In this way a horrible race of monsters was born, the broos, who are like their father and have no sisters.

It doesn't sound to me like she was Ragnaglar's wife. Furthermore, Ragnaglar is kin not only to Storm Bull, but directly to Orlanth himself. A previous section in the book describes how he fails an initiation in "the sex pit" and is driven mad, but his brothers rescue him and put up with him thereafter. I'll discuss this fellow later.

I should also explain the fictional writer's bias as well. All this occurs during the Storm Age, in the Lesser Darkness. Orlanth has usurped the rulership of the gods by killing Yelm the Emperor. That's significant: there is no rule of established, community-supported law. Orlanth's justice is all about a "king" being a chief of chiefs, and to such a chief, justice is a matter of case-by-case judgment and assigned compensation (e.g. weregild). And bear in mind that all this is before the advent of Andrin the Lawgiver, who provided a better structure for negotiating justice and establishing precedent. Therefore Orlanth presents judgment by saying to Thed, "Here's the culprit. Name your punishment."

What does Thed do? She ignores Ragnaglar and turns her attention to the world itself. She chooses to become a full goddess of what happened to her. She inflicts the crime that was perpetrated upon her onto all of reality—i.e., she brings rape into the world as a potential subject of *worship*, which includes transforming her goat-people into their current form. Through her decision, and through the broo's atrocious activities, all women and indeed all beings must now fear this act to a vastly greater degree. The net total of suffering and torment in the world jumps up a notch. And as stated above, her story continues with her alliance and coupling with Ragnaglar and Mallia, to create Wakboth.

So the whole Unholy Trio story is really





Thed's. Ragnaglar and Mallia are secondary; they make no particular decisions and do nothing she's not involved with. Unlike the *Cults of Terror* text, which introduces these three as already-malevolent conspirators, this material tells us who did what before that, and how Thed came to be the center of the Trio. Her whole Godtime saga proceeds as follows: (1) she is raped by Ragnaglar, (2) she seeks justice from Orlanth, (3) she chooses to deify rape, (4) she allies with the other two deities of the Unholy Trio and they are first exiled and then killed by Humakt, (5), they kill Rashoran, (5) "they did what they could do to each other" (*King of Sartar*) and Thed births Wakboth, (6) she fights with Chaos during the Greater Darkness, and (7) she is defeated and skinned by Kyger Litor.

Keeping in mind the central question (why a goddess of rape?), what does all this imply in moral, mythic terms? Some possible initial reactions include: "Bullshit—what kind of woman would do such a thing?" And, "It's all Thed's fault, eh? Sounds like the same-old 'Blame Eve' story." And, "The men are being let off scot-free in the whole issue." One might even peg Stafford as an outright sexist pig, to use the terminology of my upbringing.

However, our game-play, my thoughts on the issue in question, some careful reading of the texts involved, and much input from the men and women in our group has yielded a more complex reaction. In play, it turned out to be the entire thematic motor (Premise) underlying our game, and indeed, our Glorantha.

As I see it, the crime of rape is Ragnaglar's and the crime of injustice is Orlanth's. *He does not enlist the community/society in passing judgment on the rapist.* He says, "Oh, you were raped? OK, here, justice is your problem, you take care of it." Orlanth does not acknowledge the responsibility of the community to pass judgment on the rapist, as a representative of the injured party. By hard-line Orlanthi mores, established community values play no role in justice. Everything is taken case-by-case as an individual revenge issue. This is one of two issues (the other is kinstribe) where Orlanthi culture falls flat on its face. For these issues, such

"justice" only yields further harm.

Orlanth does not acknowledge that the act was itself wrong, in a generalized sense, and that it needs a standing penalty that will be enforced even in the absence of the victim's power to enforce it. Even worse, the *King of Sartar* text strongly implies that if Orlanth had known his brother was the perpetrator, he would not have offered justice at all. Thed's response suddenly takes on power and meaning—she rightly pegs the existing society as insensitive to, even dismissive of, the crime of rape that exists within it. Thed did not invent rape. It already existed, and she suffered it. Nor did she invent its atrocious, explosive properties (as expressed in the brood); they are the result of society's inability to admit to the rape within it. Instead, despite her appeal, she was isolated by that community. She invents neither rape nor its societal denial. Nor does she invent Chaos. She reveals them. "You think *this* is judgment? I'll show you judgment. You think *this* is Chaos? I'll show you Chaos."

I then reviewed all the literature again to make sure that I was not sugar-coating or rewriting—this was not out of a sense of purism, but rather to see whether some inkling of the conclusion was there. And you know what? The *King of Sartar* writeup never assigns Thed guilt (unlike the *Lords of Terror* text which mentions her later willingness to be raped by Wakboth). Although it's not articulated in the terms I outline above, I'm convinced that Stafford knew exactly what he was doing.

Now for Ragnaglar, for a moment. His brothers knew he was an uncontrollable rapist, and they knew he was crazy. But Orlanth perceived justice against his acts as "shame"? And to project some of my reading onto the text, I think Ragnaglar's own view toward Thed is, "She must have liked it." Nowhere is any commitment of Thed to Ragnaglar mentioned, and the phrase "said to have been wife to Ragnaglar at one time" becomes especially interesting.

It also strikes me that the the ritual of the Unholy Trio, which refers very directly to a sexual threesome in my reading, is *still* rape; it had to have been, to produce the Devil. Given that Thed entered into the ritual (and quite likely





organized it), the act signifies, to me, an internalization of the abuse on her part—gaining “power” through trying to own the suffering she experiences, rather than empowerment per se. It’s sex whose power is generated through hate.

Is Thed a heroine, then? Emphatically not—a vengeful victim is not automatically a hero. But neither is she a Disney villainess who mucks up reality just because her ego is wounded or a bitch who does it just because she can. Nor is she lacking in insight. She effectively tears the veil off the notion that rape is an individualized, isolated indiscretion. The crime she suffered always existed, and now, it never stops. Her spawn, Wakboth, prompted the end of Godtime; he will also prompt the climax of the Hero Wars and provide the transition to the world to come, as hinted in *King of Sartar*. Thed is literally Glorantha’s “open wound.”

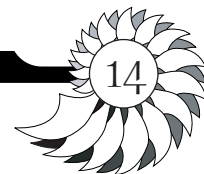
Gloranthan mythology is not wholly original. It is syncretic, incorporating elements of many, many real mythologies: Celtic, Persian, Native American, Scandinavian, Greek and more. Whether this is good or bad is up to the individual, although I know some folks who find it aggravating. However, this issue stands out. I am unaware of any real mythos that deals with the issue of rape in the sense I’ve described here. The only parallel I find is in literature, in John Milton’s *Paradise Lost*, which similarly brings up rape and the origin of moral evil in the character of Sin. From *Paradise Lost* (Book Two):

Before the Gates there sat  
On either side a formidable shape;  
The one seem’d Woman to the waste, and fair,  
But ended foul in many a scaly fould  
Voluminous and vast, a Serpent arm’d  
With mortal sting: about her middle round  
A cry of Hell Hounds never ceasing bark’d  
With wide Cerberean mouths full loud, and rung  
A hideous Peal: yet, when they list, would creep,  
If aught disturb’d thir noyse, into her wombe,  
And kennel there, yet there still bark’d and howl’d  
Within unseen. ...

[The other “shape” is Death, who gets snippy with Satan and almost prompts a fight, except

the “Snake Sorceress” intervenes; Satan asks who she is. She describes her birth from his Satan’s forehead long ago. - RE]

... back they recoild affraid  
At first, and call’d me SIN, and for a Sign  
Portentous held me; but familiar grown,  
I pleas’d, and with attractive graces won  
The most averse, thee chiefly, who full oft  
Thy self in me thy perfect image viewing  
Becam’st enamour’d, and such joy thou took’st  
With me in secret, that my womb conceiv’d  
A growing burden. Mean while Warr arose,  
And fields were fought in Heav’n; wherein remaind  
(For what could else) to our Almighty Foe  
Cleer Victory, to our part loss and rout  
Through all the Empyrean: down they fell  
Driv’n headlong from the Pitch of Heaven, down  
Into this Deep, and in the general fall  
I also; at which time this powerful Key  
Into my hand was giv’n, with charge to keep  
These Gates for ever shut, which none can pass  
Without my op’ning. Pensive here I sat  
Alone, but long I sat not, till my womb  
Pregnant by thee, and now excessive grown  
Prodigious motion felt and rueful throes.  
At last this odious offspring whom thou seest  
Thine own begotten, breaking violent way  
Tore through my entrails, that with fear and pain  
Distorted, all my nether shape thus grew  
Transform’d: but he my inbred enemy  
Forth issu’d, brandishing his fatal Dart  
Made to destroy: I fled, and cry’d out Death;  
Hell trembl’d at the hideous Name, and sigh’d  
From all her Caves, and back resounded Death.  
I fled, but he pursu’d (though more, it seems,  
Inflam’d with lust then rage) and swifter far,  
Me overtook his mother all dismayd,  
And in embraces forcible and foule  
Ingendring with me, of that rape begot  
These yelling Monsters that with ceaseless cry  
Surround me, as thou sawst, hourly conceiv’d  
And hourly born, with sorrow infinite  
To me, for when they list into the womb  
That bred them they return, and howle and gnaw  
My Bowels, their repast; then bursting forth  
Afresh with conscious terrors vex me round,  
That rest or intermission none I find.







[emphasis mine - RE]

[Then Satan tells her:]

... know  
I come noemie, but to set free  
From out this dark and dismal house of pain,  
Both him and thee, and all the heav'nly Host ...

[Sin responds:]

The key of this infernal Pit by due,  
And by command of Heav'ns all-powerful King  
I keep, by him forbidden to unlock  
These Adamantine Gates; against all force  
Death ready stands to interpose his dart,  
Fearless to be o'rematcht by living might.  
But what ow I to his commands above  
Who hates me, and hath hither thrust me down  
Into this gloom of Tartarus profound,  
To sit in hateful Office here confin'd,  
Inhabitant of Heav'n, and heav'nlie-born,  
Here in perpetual agonie and pain,  
With terrors and with clamors compass't round  
Of mine own brood, that on my bowels feed:  
Thou art my Father, thou my Author, thou  
My being gav'st me; whom should I obey  
But thee, whom follow? thou wilt bring me soon  
To that new world of light and bliss, among  
The Gods who live at ease, where I shall Reign  
At thy right hand voluptuous, as beseems  
Thy daughter and thy darling, without end.

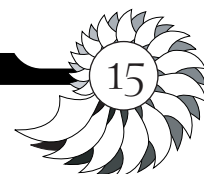
Thus saying, from her side the fatal Key,  
Sad instrument of all our woe, she took;  
And towards the Gate rousing her bestial train,  
Forthwith the huge Porcullis high up drew,  
Which but her self not all the Stygian powers  
Could once have mov'd; then in the key-hole turns  
Th' intricate wards, and every Bolt and Bar  
Of massie Iron or sollid Rock with ease  
Unfast'ns: on a sudden op'n flie  
With impetuous recoil and jarring sound  
Th' infernal dores, and on thir hinges great  
Harsh Thunder, that the lowest bottom shook  
Of Erebus. She op'nd, but to shut  
Excel'd her power; the Gates wide op'n stood ...

That's powerful stuff, and Gloranthan mythology probably borrowed a thing or two from it. But in that mythology, Thed takes the issue much further, specifically to those of the community, justice, and denial. Since it's a solid, sobering, and narratively-inspiring treatment even in comparison with Milton, I stand in awe. In this instance, the fictional mythos of Glorantha rears up on its own hind feet and says, "I am myth, derived from none other." It speaks uniquely to our reality, to our problems, and to our self-image.

### Our game

The player-characters were some back-woods Heortlings whose community history includes inadvertent incest. After a few sessions, their loyalties centered on Aething, a modified Antigone character, as the clan leader, and that decision became the core of everything to follow. They discovered their clan myth included a Thed-Daimon named Eech'ya, specialized to issues of incest-abuse. Eech'ya, a stalking figure with long clawed hands but beautiful features, cloaked in pale, soft leather, became a station in their heroquest to establish themselves as a Hero Band. This quest "crossed" other heroquests, including those by exceptional broos. Later play saw more servitors or aspects of Thed-worship, such as Sheth the anti-Lunar, hard-line-Thed broo shaman, and his rebel son Tenslayer, a broo who struggled to contain his own defiled nature through the help of the Seven Mothers and who suspected that Thed had received a raw deal in the core myths.

The original plan had been to play out a story over perhaps five or six sessions. But when the players established the Graming Hero Band and determined upon their political goals, there was no stopping. As I prepped for our tenth, then our eighteenth, and eventually our twenty-seventh session and beyond, with yet more to work with each time, I considered the myths more and more. My watchword for myths, whether taken whole cloth from the Gloranthan source material or made up by me or a player, is always to look for the gaps, because those become unexpected stations during heroquesting. Eventually, I came upon these questions which I could not





answer based on the texts and myths: *Why did the women goddesses not speak for Thed? Especially, why didn't Vinga? And regarding Thed, where were her kin?*

These questions powered the final story of our game. I introduced a historical character, Kistralde, based partly on the real-life legend of Boudicea, but bringing in spousal rape as well, as the fellow on the other side who rapes her, although not her daughters, is her husband. I further included the splintering of the three daughters' loyalty to their mother over the fate of the resulting child. This scenario was set in Far Point, and I decided that both Vingan and Yelornan heroquesters were attempting to co-opt the history of the event into a myth. Both cults (one pro-Lunar, the other anti-Lunar) rely on denying sexuality as a basis for power, and they wanted to "own" the story for that purpose.

Our heroes learned that Kistralde's chaostainted child was the problem at the center of the history, and that's why two of her daughters, one a Vingan, wouldn't help her, and that's where Manslime comes from. This is a bit of canonical fun on my part, as in *Dorastor: Land of Doom*, Manslime is a significant character in Ralzakark's broo army. (As a side note, that's why Sheth was such a powerful shaman, as he knew this as a subcult Secret.)

Our heroes' interaction with this conflict provided the climactic sequence and heroquest for the whole game. They invented the myth of Kistralde themselves, defying the other two cults' attempts to do so. Unlike the others, they acknowledged the child instead of suppressing his existence. Here's where things got hinky. Acknowledging a chaos child of this sort crossed this heroquest into another one, which was a big deal in our story as well. Women and women-cults all over Far Point were conducting a very deep, shared heroquest to determine who Ernalda's husband is, Yelm or Orlanth. Basically, our heroes crashed this heroquest and said, "Listen up, this 'husband' business masks a serious problem." This permitted them to crack open a still "deeper" heroquest into the Storm Age itself, forcing the participators in the women-ritual to enter into the judgment of Thed.

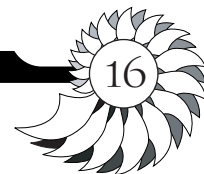
It was time for me to consider what Thed might be like in visual terms, especially early in the myths. Thed is not described physically in the primary *RuneQuest* material (few gods are), so I checked out the secondary *RuneQuest* literature that arose through intensive game-play during the 1970s and 1980s. A lot of it is in fanzines and fortunately a lot of that has made it onto the internet, so a search for "Thed Glorantha" or anything similar yields a lot of stuff. Some of the scenarios and stories troubled me greatly, as they relied on Thed being all about manipulative, uncontrollable lust, a kind of evil Venus or Ishtar. The similarity of this viewpoint on the part of role-players to my interpretation of Ragnaglar is frankly appalling. As far as descriptions/imagery goes, what I mainly found was fairly predictable: a goat-headed female broo, with a distended belly, and with an oversized, toothed vagina from which tentacles issue, and similar. I think it's mainly derived from Lovecraftian pastiche images of Shub-Niggurath ("the goat with a thousand young").

The same kind of thing can be found in the additional text in *Lords of Terror* (1994):

Thed is usually pictured by her children as a bestial female broo, often with snakes for breasts or a gaping fanged mouth where her vagina should be. The Praxians and Orlanthi picture Thed as a gigantic, slim figure with a long, tufted tail and two deformed, clawed arms. Her head has four curved horns, ropy hair, and five antennae or tentacles arrayed about her mouth. Her eyes or vagina are usually ritually disfigured as a ward against her power.

I'm relatively certain that this published text, as well as the reference to her *willing submission* to rape (!) are derived mainly from these fan-based sources. As such, I decided that all of these implications could be jettisoned with little loss. Significantly, in *Glorantha: Introduction to the Hero Wars*, the *Cults of Terror* text is repeated but the *Lords of Terror* text is not.

I interpreted Thed as a maiden with goat horns, as I figured the goat-affinity didn't have to be all negative at this point in the myth, but otherwise quite human. We figured her twisted





and misshapen qualities originated in the later ritual and the birth of Wakboth. As this portion of the heroquest began, it was a terrifically unsettling experience to play the raped goat-maiden, occasionally slipping in her own blood as she climbed the harsh path alone to Orlanth's Hall. When she displayed her wound, it was of course her vagina, and I played the scene full of shame, yet with desperation for justice just barely strong enough to overcome it.

Orlanth's hall is a scary place, full of Storm Warriors' roistering and Orlanth's justice handed out left and right. When Thed presents herself, Ragnaglar cackles and leers, hiding behind his brothers. Orlanth is sincerely shocked by the evidence of rape, but also uncomfortable with allowing judgment, and he makes excuses for Ragnaglar. Vinga turns away but will not speak up. For the characters, in game-mechanics terms, this was an ugly situation. They were losing affinities and suffering greatly in acquired penalties to be defying their King this way. Their only hope was to shame the goddesses with the lesson of the new Kistralde myth.

Because the heroes had included women priestesses and followers from all around Dragon Pass into witnessing these events, they could then, in the myth itself, enlist the women of the pantheon as Orlanth struggles with his decision. They told them: marriage will not save you from rape (here we brought in the "husband" issue of Ragnaglar, as one of the goddesses suggests that Ragnaglar and Thed be married to solve the problem), and motherhood will not provide you with automatic morality (strong words to Ernaldans!). The climax of the story, then, arrived when Tenslayer and Aething spoke up: "We are the children of the damned, and we have come home."

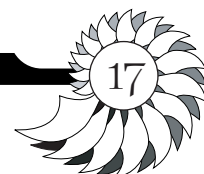
I won't say what happened then in detail. I will ask, instead, if you and other people you know were playing in this scenario, "What do you think?" What abilities would you roll, and what Action Points would be bid, about what? The answer is crucial for your Glorantha.

## Conclusion

I submit that the issue of rape in Glorantha cannot be ignored in the long term. In play, if you meet and fight broos, rape enters the story. If rape enters the story among non-broos, Thed is there as well. Certainly one might avoid both of these entirely, but to do so is to avoid a primary monster-race of Dragon Pass and Dorastor, and to gut the mythological setting of one of its central back-story elements. And to remove rape and sexual abuse of any kind from a desperate wartime setting seems disingenuous or worse.

The mythology in question is especially key to Dragon Pass play. Broos are all over the place. A Lunar worshipper must be confronted with the expectation to "include" broos in *We Are All Us*, and a Heortling must be confronted with the ethical and judicial limitations of his or her culture, which are responsible for the broos' existence. Yes, Thed is a minor, grubby goddess, but as I played her in our game, I *heard* her crone-cackling, poisoned laughter at the Lunar conceit that Chaos can be included and controlled, and also at the Orlanthi conceit to fight Chaos using cultural mores which themselves perpetuate the wrongs that Thed represents. Unlike the more powerful gods, she knows that the Devil (moral evil) can be neither embraced nor beaten. That's why the Old World must end. I don't think I can role-play in Glorantha again without knowing that abused, vicious laughter is in the background.

I submit that Thed represents one of the primary Mysteries of Glorantha, which is to say, an issue for which a Hero Band must literally invent the New World's morality, as past myth and cultures failed to do. In our game, we did that, and we spoke for Thed for a brief moment of glory, and assigned the injustice where it belonged. We couldn't save her entirely, nor stop the Great Darkness, which was "set" in the story too deeply. But the characters were heroes who would not let Thed face her fate alone. That's why my deluxe copy of *HeroQuest* bears the rune of Thed, which on the face of it seems obscene. But for our group, it's a badge of pride. Ω







# The power of myth in role-playing

## How to make your sessions resonate with meaning



Article by  
Chris Chinn

Chris Chinn is an avid gamer, writer, philosopher and cook. He's written some things, illustrated some stuff, and did some of that other business over there. He has also been known to eat mangos.

This article is inspired by two major sources: *HeroQuest* and *The World of the Dark Crystal*. I highly recommend both books. That said, this article came from my personal observation that myth in *HeroQuest* play can become a background element, a history, whereas *Glorantha* is all about living a myth, living *in* a myth, and creating a myth as you play.

While thinking about the “living myth” of *Glorantha*, I began to think about the necessity of leaving enough “space” in myths for players to create their own legends. And along with that, I thought of the necessity of making theme happen.

### Bringing myth into your game

We all know at some level what myth is, but it is not so easily translated to role-playing games. We may have all the elements of myth, such as magic, monsters and strange lands, but somewhere the mythic quality is lost. At the same time, we watch movies—*Star Wars*, *Gladiator*, or *The Matrix*—produce new myths before our eyes, and they do so sometimes without many of those elements. Clearly it's not the fantastic elements that define myth. Rather, it is the style of presentation. Here's how to bring that into your game.

### Theme

All myths are based around themes. We may recognize memorable characters and amazing stories in mythical tales, but it is the themes that we connect to on a deeper level, themes that give the myth deeper meaning. Abstract themes are common in mythology. Many myths are filled with tales of light, darkness, good, evil, life, death, rebirth, logic, passion, redemption, corruption, innocence, and more. If you want to create myth, you must create theme.

### Introducing theme

Theme in role-playing games determines “what the game is about.” I recommend sitting

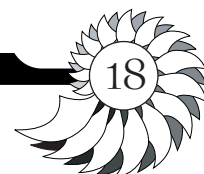
down as a group and agree on two or three primary themes in your game. At this point, you're simply deciding what themes are active and whether any specific groups or characters are acting as representatives of those themes. You are not casting judgment on the theme. It is best if the player characters are “undecided” and not already supporting one theme for sure. Consider it simply declaring where the crux of the conflict is, thereby agreeing as a group upon the theme you will explore in play.

*EXAMPLE: Members of a group decide they want to have the themes of Life, Death, and Rebirth. No one makes any decisions like, “All three are necessary for existence,” or, “Death comes to us all,” or anything like that. All those sorts of ideas come forward in actual play itself. But, the group does decide that a particular political group represents Death, and a group of indigenous people represents Life, and the conflict between the two groups plays as a mirror for the thematic conflict.*

### Using Theme

Obviously, during play, most games have no explicit rules to encourage people using theme. They players either “just do it” or they don't. This is the simplest, but also the hardest, way to make themes happen in play.

Your group might consider house rules that encourage theme. The easiest way to do this is have the game master to reward players each time they advance theme. Or, the game master might award bonuses (experience points, hero-points, karma, etc.) to any roll involving the group's chosen themes. Some games, such as *The Riddle of Steel* or *The Questing Beast* have these rules built into their systems as an integral part of the game.





EXAMPLE: *A player character uses magic and brings an enemy back from the brink of death. The character says, "You have died. Your bond to your master is finished, for you have given your life. This life you have now is yours, free of obligation. Find out who you are. Live your life."*

The game master considers this to be an outstanding use of theme, not to mention a great twist on the story events in the game. Accordingly, he rewards the player with a good amount of extra points.

### Personal Themes

Characters should be built on personal themes. As a group, you should all sit down and create characters together, speaking freely and trading ideas. Instead of starting off rolling dice and juggling points, you should start with a personal theme. This theme can be a variation on one of the primary themes, or it can be a neutral theme to interpret in the light of the primary themes.

Again, the game master can choose to mechanically reward use of personal theme. Many games make personal theme a focal point for their systems, including *Sorcerer*, *Dust Devils*, and *Everway*.

EXAMPLE: *One player chooses to base his character around the theme of Redemption. While this plays close to the concept of Rebirth, it also indicates a form of guilt, sin or corruption, a form of Death. His character is a priest who has lost his faith. Another player decides to mirror the concept with Fanaticism, a zealot who is absolutely sure of his beliefs, yet only paves the road to hell with his good intentions. Perhaps the fanatic will be able to show the priest the path to Redemption, or perhaps he will only drive him straight to damnation. Perhaps the priest will be able to show the fanatic Redemption. The situation between those two player characters alone makes the game very interesting.*

### The Past & Future, the Chain of Destiny

In mythology, everything has a past, and everything important has a future. The past in myth is a mirror to the future, either predicting what may occur or warning against it. Within your game, make sure all of the player characters are connected to a sense of history. While not all of the characters may be aware of their history, that history should still exist. The players should be aware of it, though their character may not be.

The past points to the future. It could be a literal prophecy that must be carried out or prevented from occurring. It could be like the tale of Atlantis destroying itself with forbidden power as a forewarning to prevent its reoccurrence. It could be a hopeful tale of a messiah who returns once every 10,000 years.

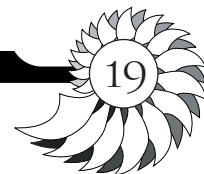
EXAMPLE: *"This sword has slain the greatest king the world has ever known, and the greatest tyrant the world has ever seen, and now it lies in your hands. This sword cuts for destiny. How will you use it?"*

Looking at this example, it's pretty clear that the character will probably encounter some more powerful individuals, and be able to shape history by either letting them live or putting an end to their lives. The past foreshadows the future. . . .

Some games allow players to give input to "set up" the sorts of events that may occur within play. *Sorcerer*, *The Riddle of Steel*, and *Dust Devils* all achieve this by allowing players to set up focal points for conflict with their characters. It's easy for mechanics to support the idea of destiny or fate conspiring to bring a character to a moment of truth.

### The Broken Link—Now

Here's where things get tricky. All of the above is set up for actual play. For myth to come forward in your play, you need to be able to utilize the aforementioned themes, but you must also leave "space" in which the group will actually play. You might say that the mythology you've developed cannot be a finished product; it must make "room" for the heroes to write their tales, from triumph to tragedy.





### Protagonists Matter

In myth, the decisions of the protagonists have important effects. Success and failure each have consequences. There are no meaningless actions. Likewise, the GM needs to drop player characters into situations that matter. Player characters must make hard decisions, and the situations must put something important at stake. The effects of these choices may come back in unusual or unexpected ways, or perhaps they will have larger effects than anticipated.

EXAMPLE: *In the example above, the player chose to resurrect a villainous character. Much later, the villain returns to save the player in a dangerous situation. "You have saved my life, I have saved yours. We are equal. Next time we meet, I shall be your foe once more!" The previous actions of the player character return at a crucial moment.*

### A Crossroads

In all myths, we have a crossroads. While many meaningful decisions are made along the way, at some point, near the climax of the story, a "final" decision must be made. It is a final statement involving the abstract forces at work. Either one emerges dominant, or else a form of reconciliation occurs. For players to be able to create their myth, they have to be able to freely choose how that happens.

The crossroads is a tricky spot because what you consider to be a "major decision" may not, in fact, be the real crux of conflict for the character. The player may push for a decision that he considers to be the true focus of play for his character. This is why some games give mechanical reinforcement allow both players and games masters to really indicate to each other how "high up" decisions are on the "drama meter."

EXAMPLE: *In the example above, the character created a priest who lost his faith and whose theme is redemption. Now, the priest lies beaten and battered, and he's at the mercy of his foe. The villain demands to know where the indigenous tribes have hidden their holy artifact. The priest looks up and says, "I may not know if God is*

*watching anymore, but I know in my heart what is right and wrong. And that is enough for me. You will never know!" He lunges up and pulls a dagger from his foe's belt, then stabs himself before the villain can do anything.*

Here, we have Death, but with Redemption. Both the group's primary theme and the player's personal theme tie together in one final decision.

### Consequences

The climactic decision must hold greater weight and importance than simply the action alone. The decision must reward the player by rippling out its effects. The player's decision *must* matter. Usually with the final decision, whatever was at stake enjoys or suffers consequences accordingly.

We see this final moment in popular films. In the animated film *Princess Mononoke*, the land is saved. In *The Dark Crystal*, the world is healed. In *Tron*, the system is made free. In all of these, we see fantastic consequences that are the result of characters that make decisions. This is what you should aim for in your game.

EXAMPLE: *Though the priest character in the previous example died, his death was not in vain. The villain struggles, and he still cannot find the holy artifact. He discovers the indigenous tribe only when it is too late for his aims; the tribe completes their ritual to heal the land. His henchman (who was resurrected in the earlier example) has a change of heart at the last minute. The henchman sacrifices himself to stop the villain. The player character who saved him runs up in time for the henchman's last words: "I don't know if God is watching, but your friend was right. I know between right and wrong ... Even when I try to do what is right, I still chose death."*

"No, you chose right," the player character responds. "You chose right."

Tears are shed, sad music plays, but the land is saved. Death becomes rebirth becomes life. Yay! A deep game and meaningful outcome is shared by all. This is myth in action. Ω







# ARGONAUTS

## THE TRAGEDY OF HEROES



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### Preview by Jonathan Walton

An Inside Look at the First "Genre Book" for the Mutants & Masterminds Superlink license

*"It is the will of heaven and destiny that you shall return here with the fleece. Meanwhile, both going and returning, countless trials await you. But it is my lot, by the hateful decree of a god, to die somewhere far off on the mainland of Asia. Thus, though I learned of my fate through evil omens, I have left my fatherland to sail on this ship, so that after my embarking great honor may be bestowed upon my house."*

—from *The Argonautica* by Apollonius Rhodius

Argonauts: The Tragedy of Heroes

By Jonathan Walton





### Preview by Jonathan Walton

Jonathan Walton is trying to stop being a senior East Asian Studies major at Oberlin College, but there's so much left to do. In any case, he hopes to see "Argonauts" in print before he graduates and is currently working on a raucous operetta based on Milton's "Paradise Lost." Being a creature that lives and breathes aesthetics, narratology, and identity studies, Jonathan thinks role-playing is peachy keen.

### Sing, Muse, of the Rage of Achilles...

It is a time of heroes. Mythology runs in the veins of the people. Who will step forward and take up the mantle of the hero? The son of a king, the daughter of a god, or the orphaned child of mystery? The call to greatness pounds in the ears of every mortal that draws breath. With every splash of your heart, a legend is summoning you to be a part of it. It says, "If you will only give yourself to me, dear child of the Achaeans, I will raise you above all others, up to the pinnacle of this Age. They will look to you and say, 'That is how a life is to be lived.' I will burn you bright and fast, and you will not last long. But, I will make you into a beacon that shines eternal. And you shall never truly die." This is the promise made to every hero, and the bargain, once made, is never broken.

You did not decide to become a hero while sitting beside a roaring hearth. You decided with your sweat and sword and blood and bone. When you slew the monster that stalked your village. When you dared to drive the chariot of the gods. When you escaped the clutches of your enemies on wings of wax and feathers. When you sang a song that made the trees weep. This is the path of the hero. For you, there is no other. This is what your own heart expects of you, and it is only satiated by the thrill of victory and the exaltation of thousands. You were not born to do this, but you have made the life your own. There is no turning back. The headiness of adoration is sweeter than wine.

Joining the few and the proud, you have given up all hope of every leading a peaceful and boring life. You will never grow old,

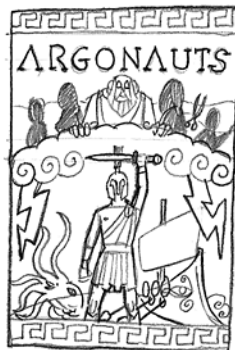
watching your grandchildren blossom in the springtime. You will never clutch your true love to your chest, hold them tight, and promise them forever—without knowing it to be a lie. For the hero, there are no happy endings. There are no sunsets to ride off into. There is only disaster and weeping. It is not a question of "if." It is only a matter of "when" and "how." But this is the sacrifice you have willingly made in order to become myth. Nothing is gained without risk. And so you have risked all for a single chance at everything.

It is not as if you are going in blindly, without full knowledge of the agreement you have made with Fate. Troy, after all, was not destroyed in a day, and the indomitable spirit of a hero is not so quickly crushed. Instead, it is slowly disassembled, piece-by-piece, as you look on, helpless to stop the ruin of everything you hold dear. Your existence has become a grand tragedy of epic proportions. Act-by-act, scene-by-scene, line-by-line, it plays out on the world stage for all to see. And, when it's over, there will be no curtain call. You will never even hear the applause.

### I was a Grade School Mythology Freak

Superheroes rock. Doesn't matter if they wear tights or scream in vain to the gods while dying a tragic, ill-fated death. Heroes appeal to our sense of drama. We want to hear about people living more fully and passionately than most of the plebes on this puny little blue-green planet. We want to hear about people fighting for ideals and their own personal feelings, and we want to see them actually *succeeding*, actually *making a difference*, since this world often frustrates those who would make real changes.

*Argonauts* is a "genre book" designed for use with the *Mutants & Masterminds Core Rules* released by Green Ronin Publishing. The game itself will be published under their *M&M Superlink* license, along with the OGL. Instead of dealing with the modern genre of 4-color superheroes, *Argonauts* focuses on the superheroes of Classical mythology, the warriors and demigods of Greek legends. Ultimately, *Argonauts* is about the same things that *M&M*





is about: following your passions and dealing with the aftermath. Or, to quote that infamous superhero cliché, *power and responsibility*.

This isn't to say, of course, that there are no differences between the spandex types and the Classical heroes of Greek myth. While *Argonauts* will pay passing homage to Achaeans showing up in comics (various incarnations of Hercules, the Amazons, the Olympian Gods, etc.), its main focus will be presenting mythic heroes within their own context, or at least something like it. Deciding what mixture of genres to emulate is ultimately not up to me, the designer, but to the players and game masters to whom *Argonauts* belongs. Still, the main text of this "genre book" will assume your Amazons are the kind that cut off a breast to be better archers, not the ones that carry magical lassos.

### Real Heroes Always Die

They do. Die like dogs. And then people tie their corpses to chariots and ride around the city. Not a pretty fate and that's exactly the point. Happy endings don't prove that you have the mettle of a hero. If you can face your fate with courage, knowing that it is of your own doing, you just might get made into a constellation. Hey, don't laugh. It's better than Hades.

Hercules. Jason. Oedipus. Achilles. Theseus. Daedalus. Atlanta. Orpheus. Hector. Medea. Agamemnon. And the casualty list goes on and on. Not clean, pretty deaths either. Orpheus was torn to bits by revelers at a bacchanal orgy. Agamemnon was diced apart in his bathtub, by his own wives. Those who managed to survive after their fate manifested itself (Daedalus, Oedipus, Theseus) lost sons, wives, and fathers in horrible accidents of fortune. Tragedy is the name of the game. *No one gets out alive.*

So how do you take a game like *Mutants & Masterminds* and make it work in a genre where everyone meets a tragic end? Clearly you can't just include monster write-ups for Minotaurs and Harpies, throw Homer quotes around, and hope to do justice to the original material. This is why *Argonauts* takes the form it does, not just a sourcebook for *M&M*, but a full-fledged genre-based adaptation.



### Killing D20 and Taking Its Stuff

M&M fans will notice several major differences from the system they are familiar with.

▲ **Smaller Skill List:** *Argonauts* uses a skill list that is significantly lighter than the one in *M&M*, reflecting the time period, the iconic nature of myths, and a shift away from skills in general.

▲ **More Limited Super-Power Selection:** Classical Greek heroes are much more limited in their array of "super-powers" than modern heroes—who can walk through walls or shoot energy out of their eyes. To reflect this, *Argonauts* offers a short list of Common powers, a more costly set of Uncommon ones, and then Sorcery, an alternative for those who want to get in touch with their inner Medea.

▲ **Power Levels replaced by Myth:** Instead of having Power Levels, the three types of Mythic Entities (Mythic Beings, Mythic Beasts, and Mythic Tasks) are rated by their level of Myth. This is used



both in character creation and in the advancement system.

- △ **Experience System replaced by Mythic Deeds:** Instead of advancing through GM-awarded points, Mythic Entities advance through conflicts with each other. By achieving Mythic Deeds (defeating another Mythic Entity of equal or higher Myth), a hero's myth grows stronger, empowering them further, but moving them closer to their Fate.
- △ **Damage System replaced by Fate:** Classical heroes don't just die *in medias res* because of a bad roll or an ill-planned decision. They only die through meeting the tragic end fated for them. Therefore, *Argonauts* replaces Damage with Fate. Characters don't become damaged at all, as far as the system is concerned. Wounds and mental anguish simply move them closer to their Fate.
- △ **Hero and Villain Points replaced by Invocation of the Gods:** In order to reflect the gods' influence on the mortal world, Hero and Villain points have been dropped in favor of the new Invocation system (described below), which determines which gods are attentive to the heroes' plight and just how they go about helping or hindering them.

### The Agony and the Ecstasy

The double-edged sword of Myth & Fate governs every hero's descent into a personal hell. Myth is the passion that drives you, responsible for both your rise to greatness and for protecting you from the dangers you've faced thus far. Fate is the darkness that will tear you down, something ultimately both external and internal. Myth and Fate are the most critical components of Classical heroes. Everyone has Fate, but only heroes temper it with the blood and glory of Myth.

Your Fate Record is on the right-hand side of the character sheet and measures your character's progress on their path towards catastrophe. The sheet begins blank, with 20 boxes that represent the thread of a hero's life, one strand of

the epic tapestry of existence. In time, the thread will be Spun, Measured, and, finally, Cut. To record the character's tragic movement towards the end, boxes will be marked off during the course of the game, just like the damage boxes in *M&M*. Damage is an obvious reason to mark off boxes, but you also lose them for other things that make your fate draw nearer.

Myth, the second half of this equation, is measured numerically, like Power Levels. Similarly, characters can start at any level of Myth, from 0-19. You could start at Myth 20, but that would mean your Fate was moments away from destroying you utterly, and what fun would that be? In addition to providing a measure of power and the points with which to build your character, Myth can be invoked anytime as an additional modifier equal to its level. For instance, a Myth-7 hero could have a +7 modifier to use at will. The only downside: after invoking your Myth modifier, you have to make a Myth Check, rolling over your Myth on a d20 or checking off a Fate box and moving closer to your doom. So, it's relative low-risk, but only at low Myth levels.

Myth and Fate also balance each other. The more power and prestige you gain, the closer you are to the end of the line. After all, what kind of tragedy would it be if you lived to enjoy all the rewards of fame? For every point of Myth a character has, one Fate block is permanently blackened out, unable to be healed or recovered in any fashion. As each hero advances in Myth, they lose more and more Fate blocks and progress towards their ultimate end. For this reason, characters starting at different Myth levels are really quite distinct in nature, being at different points in their path towards Fate. Starting characters can either be No Myth (0), Low Myth (1-4), Medium Myth (5-9), High Myth (10-14), or Blaze of Glory (15-19), each having a slightly different perspective on the hero's life and their immediate purpose:

- △ **No Myth:** Starting out with 0 Myth means that the character is not yet a "hero." You haven't accomplished any Mythic Deeds, nobody knows who you







are, and anybody with an ounce of Myth in them rightly ignores you. However, all great heroes had to start somewhere. Not everyone can strangle serpents as a baby. Your first key task, however, is going to be a test. You have to prove yourself, so begin looking for Deeds worthy of a hero.

- Δ **Low Myth:** Starting the game with 1-4 points of Myth marks you as a local champion with promise. Each point of Myth is one Deed that you've accomplished, winning you fame, fortune, admiring glances, and quite a few scars. Still, you're not quite ready to march on Troy or even join the crew of the Argo. You still have some growing up to do. All the poets in your hometown may sing your praises, but you're still a nobody to the bigwigs in Athens. It's time to move beyond your old stomping grounds and hit the big time. Maybe get a crew together and set sail for dangers unknown. In any case, it's time to make a real name for yourself.
- Δ **Medium Myth:** Characters starting with 5-9 Myth are well renowned, no matter where they go. As your record of Deeds grows, everyone is abuzz with news of your exploits. They're wondering with bated breath what great feat you're going to attempt next, and you can't keep the audience waiting. You're also beginning to feel the pressures of life on the top. People come to your with their problems, instead of just hoping someone will save them. You may ever receive requests from faraway monarchs, who will try to marry you to their beautiful and dangerous daughters (who inevitably practice Sorcery). Even more worrisome, there are signs that things may not be all fine-and-dandy. Prophecies and omens hint at an unfortunate Doom to come. You're not sweating yet, but you're definitely concerned. Still, you're also having the time

of your life and being adored by thousands upon thousands. Things could definitely be worse.

- Δ **High Myth:** Things have gotten worse. Sure, characters starting at a Myth of 10-14 are the real thing, world-class heroes like Atalanta or Theseus, but they have come to realize that their Doom will be of their own doing. The laurels of victory sit a little heavier on those jaded by so much admiration. Thoughts often grow dark and introspective, pondering past behavior, old enemies, and broken relationships. There is a thorn in your soul, a Flaw that permeates your being and cannot be separated without unraveling the foundation of your heroism. You can begin to sense your Doom approaching, though it has not yet begun to take shape. It stalks you like a predator, no matter how much you try to run or hide behind greater glories. Despite what the masses may think, you are not divine but mortal, and the gods will eventually call upon you, making you pay for the rewards they have given you—and for failing to show proper gratitude.
- Δ **Blaze of Glory:** Starting with a Myth of 15+ means that the hero has caught a glimpse of the end. They have seen their Tragedy, but cannot say for certain when or how it will enact itself. However, it is only a matter of time. It has always been inevitable, of course, but never has it loomed so imposingly before you. At this point, two options present themselves: denial and acceptance. Those who would run should start now, seeking every opportunity to move themselves far away from the danger that is coming. Those who recognize their Doom as the proper end for a hero should pull their armor from the closet, bellow a trademark war cry, and ride out onto the battlefield. It's your last chance to make a difference. Very soon,





the thread of your existence will be cut and Persephone will greet you with a bittersweet kiss.

If you choose to start at a Myth Level over 0, you'll need to work with your GM and the other players to develop a history of your past Deeds. Like you, your adventures probably started out small and got more and more dramatic as time went on. Perhaps truly accomplished heroes were lucky enough to participate in famous incidents. Perhaps they sailed aboard the Argo or just happened to be at Marathon. Be creative, but remember that people everywhere will know you by your Deeds, so make them worth remembering.

### The Long Spiral Downward

So just how does a hero progress from epic champion to a destroyed shell? How do you break someone so noble and righteous? Easy:

▲ **Damage & Marking Boxes:** Just like in standard *M&M*, characters in *Argonauts* get a Damage Save to avoid the effects of a successful attack. However, failed rolls result not in hits but in marks on the character's Fate Record, marks that are hopefully only temporary. Marks from damage are recorded as slashed boxes, just like Stun Hits in regular *M&M*. The only difference is that slashed boxes cannot push the character's Fate past one of the black dividing lines on the Record. If a hero's Fate Record is filled with slashed boxes up to one of those lines and fails another damage roll, they must go back and re-slash one of their slashed boxes, turning it into a "X," just like a Lethal Hit in *M&M*. Boxes that are crossed out in this manner (having accounted for two hits) represent more lasting damage and are not easily healed. Additionally, once a divided section of a hero's record (boxes 1-5, or 6-10, or 11-15, or 16-20) is filled up with blackened and/or crossed boxes, that step of the character's Tragedy is complete and the next section of boxes can begin to be filled.



▲ **Failing Myth Checks:** Any time a hero uses their Myth Modifier to boost a roll they have to make a Myth Check afterwards. Failing a Myth Check means that the hero's actions, while larger than life, have resulted in edging them closer towards their ultimate Doom. Failed Myth Checks convert directly to slashed boxes, just like failed Damage Checks.

▲ **Bringing About Your Tragedy:** During the progress towards their Doom, heroes will eventually see Omens, learn of their Fatal Flaw, and even catch glimpses of their actual Fate. Players should not ignore these guideposts, as it's not good to tempt the Fates too much. Persuing courses of action that seem to lead the hero closer to their Doom (as they have come to understand it from signs and portents) requires that players roll against their combined Fate, including blackened, crossed, and slashed boxes. The boxes on the Fate Record are conveniently numbered so



players can instantly see the number they have to beat. Failure to roll higher than your combined Fate number earns you yet another slashed box, just as with failed Damage and Myth Checks.

- △ **Raising Your Myth:** Raising your Myth during the course of the game requires filling in yet another blackened box on your Myth Record. Blackening such a box immediately supercedes and replaces whatever markings the box already has. The Fate Record does not, then, “slide down” to make room for the new blackened box. You simply blacken over a box, ignoring and effectively “healing” whatever damage was already there. However, since blackened boxes cannot be removed in any way, unlike crossed and slashed ones, you’re not really gaining in the long run. Still, increasing your Myth can be a good way to make annoying crossed boxes obsolete, instead of going to the trouble required to get them removed. This, of course, assumes you can afford to wait until your Myth goes up.

### The Kindly Ones

Additionally, the road downward is paved with markers to help you recognize it:

- △ **Prophecy:** When a character has 5 Fate boxes marked off, they experience their first revelation of the end. In this case, it’s in the form of an *Omen*, a sign or hint of the future doom to come. This Omen marks their actions and may even repeat on occasions where the cause or circumstances of the hero’s Fate are especially close at hand.
- △ **Spin:** When a character has marked off 10 Fate boxes, they gain knowledge of their tragic *Flaw*, the aspect of themselves that calls to their doom and ushers it nearer. The Flaw is often something hinted at by the original Omen and is inexplicably tied in with the hero’s ultimate end. Indulging in their

Flaw can force the hero to make a Fate check (as described above), since they are treading on increasingly dangerous ground. Fate is not to be tempted. This step in the journey also indicates that Clotho, the youngest of the Fates, has finished spinning the thread of the hero’s life.

- △ **Measure:** When a character has marked off 15 Fate boxes, they gain a glimpse into what form their Fate will take, gaining knowledge of their *Tragedy*. Lachesis, the middle-aged member of the Fates, has already measured your life and discovered where the end is to be, and this discovery is passed onto the hero in the form of a vague intuition about the future. The hero begins to be drawn towards his destiny, leading him to the places, people, and circumstances which will result in his final end.
- △ **Cut:** When a character has marked off his 20<sup>th</sup> and final Fate box, his *Doom*, the final stage of their Fate, is enacted. All the pieces come together, as Atropos, the eldest of the triumvirate, cuts the thread of the hero’s life.

One of the only ways to avoid this quick decline is to exchange marked Fate boxes for points of Hubris. Proudful heroes must make a Hubris check, rolling over their Hubris, when Invoking the gods (see below). Failure is generally bad news, as the Olympians despise uppity, arrogant Mortals. Hubris basically represents a character throwing off their Fate and running from it, denying that they will ever have to confront it. Oedipus and Achilles come to mind. In the end, Hubris only offers temporary release from Fate, which, now that the hero has angered the gods with his pride, will not be long in coming.

### So You Want to Be a Hero

So if that’s how a hero dies, how are they made? Heroes are created by the Mythic Deeds that they perform. Through this, and nothing else. Mythic Deeds are anything that involves besting, killing, humiliating, escaping, or otherwise defeat-



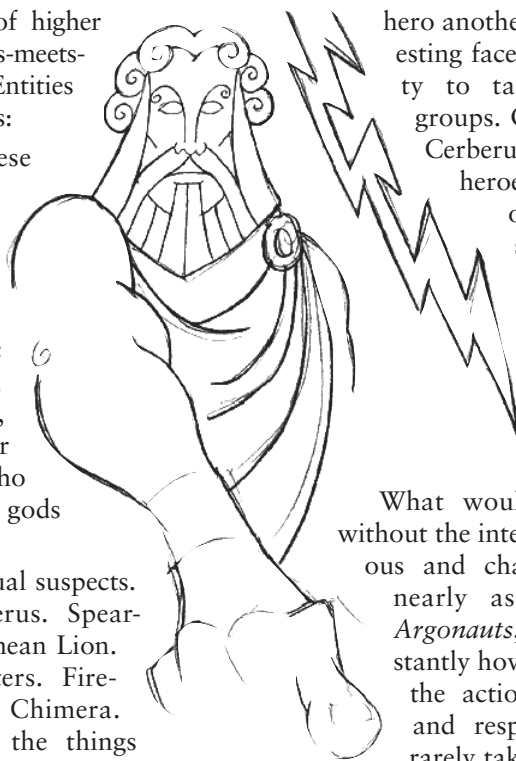


ing another Mythic Entity of higher Myth than yourself, Hercules-meets-*Highlander* style. Mythic Entities come in three distinct varieties:

- Δ **Mythic Beings:** These should be obvious, since your hero is one of them. Any mortal or demigod with a level of Myth above 0 is considered a Mythic Being. Some are heroes, some are cruel tyrants, some are nymphs or other semi-humans who are still subject to the gods' whims.
- Δ **Mythic Beasts:** The usual suspects. The Minotaur. Cerberus. Spear-birds. Hydra. The Nemean Lion. Medusa and her sisters. Fire-breathing bulls. Chimera. Cyclopes. Sirens. All the things which are more supernatural than mortal. All the things that like to eat heroes for breakfast.
- Δ **Mythic Tasks:** The Labors of Hercules. Not all challenges take the form of "defeat somebody" or "kill something." Some require wits and planning. The Cretan Labyrinth. The voyage to retrieve the Golden Fleece. Recruiting a crew for the Argo. Cleaning the world's filthiest stables. Whenever a hero gets a little too arrogant, thinking they are the greatest warrior in all of Greece, Fate throws a Mythic Task their way, keeping them humble.

All three types of Mythic Entities are built using the same point-based creation system. So you build a Labyrinth or a Harpy the same way you create a hero, choosing their starting Myth Level and working from there, purchasing powers and other abilities as you go.

The character sheet has a box specifically set aside for recording your Mythic Deeds. This is important, since every Mythic Deed gains your



hero another level of Myth. An interesting facet of the game is the ability to tackle Mythic Deeds in groups. Of course, since defeating Cerberus with a small army of heroes is much easier, parties of heroes have to set their sights high, tackling Deeds with very potent Myth Levels if they all expect to raise their own Myth.

### The View From Olympus

What would Classical roleplaying without the intervention of those boisterous and changeable divinities? Not nearly as fun, that's what. In *Argonauts*, the Olympians are constantly hovering around the edges of the action, influencing outcomes and responding to prayers, but rarely taking a direct hand.

- Δ **Spheres:** Each major and minor deity is assigned Spheres of influence. For instance, Apollo's Spheres might cover *Archery*, *Prophecy*, & *Music*, while his daughter, the muse Calliope, only governs the Sphere of *Epic Poetry*. Aphrodite would likewise have more Spheres than Eros.
- Δ **Invocation:** Additionally, at any point in the game, deities are either counted as being Attentive or Inattentive. Normally, all gods are Inattentive by default, unless you can convince them that there are situations in your life that are worthy of their attention. They're busy conniving and chasing after nymphs, most of the time. You can attempt to gain a god's attention by Invoking them, sending them a prayer while doing something related to one of their Spheres. This is a roll just like any other, adjusted by circumstances and your Invocation modifier. Olympians,





while more broadly powerful within a large number of Spheres, have a much lower (or even negative) base Invocation modifier than minor divinities like muses or Aeolus, the wind-god. Once one or more gods become Attentive to your circumstances, they will help or hinder you according to their own whims, but are very likely to assist those who amuse them or act in accord with their own secret purposes.

- ▲ **Patronage:** Over time, a hero may even make friends and enemies among the gods. A character's Patron deity has begun to show special favor to them and is much more easily Invoked. However, their standards are much higher than a spirit simply showing passing interest. Patron gods expect heroes to do things for them, not the other way around. The perks of Patronage are merely the benefits of following the god's wishes. Worse yet are the attentions of a hero's Nemesis, a god who has decided to make your life miserable. Nemeses are automatically Invoked whenever the character enters their Sphere of influence (like Odysseus setting out for home on Poseidon's ocean) and, if the Invocation is successful, can start plaguing the hero until they destroy his life or their attention is drawn elsewhere.

Gods, no matter if they're your Patron or Nemesis, are fickle and have huge demands on their attention. Invoking them merely makes them Attentive for a short period of time, usually a single scene. Afterwards, they automatically revert back to being Inattentive, at least in regard to your own circumstances. They can't watch you all the time, but will most likely return for all the highlights. Still, smart heroes should know better than to rely on the gods' favor too much. Divinities quickly tire of constant Invocations and may change their ways from favoring you to working towards bringing your Fate closer.

## Demigods & Monsters

Because of the details of the OGL and the *M&M Superlink* license, I can't easily include fully-stated example heroes and other Mythic Entities in this sneak peak, but I wanted to provide some idea of how bits of Classical mythology might be adapted for use in *Argonauts*.

- ▲ **Daedalus:** The Reed Richards of the ancient world, responsible for the Cretan Labyrinth and other marvels of craftsmanship and invention. While not a hero in the traditional sense, Daedalus would be a great character in *Argonauts*, either as a young inventor, not yet aware of his Fate, or as an old man serving Minos, the king of Crete. Daedalus' ultimate Doom, of course, would be the death of his son, Icarus, thanks to his own Hubris. In seeking to fly, Daedalus violates the natural order of things and angers the gods, so perhaps Daedalus' Doom was always close at hand, ever since Minos threw him into his own Labyrinth – a punishment for helping Theseus & Ariadne slay the Minotaur. Daedalus, then, was simply building up Hubris to buy some time, crafting the wings that would ultimately free himself and his son. However, the gods would not leave him alone forever.

- ▲ **Theseus:** The son of Poseidon, Theseus is the classic model of a hero, one who uses his muscle and sword to do most of the hard work, but still is as intelligent as they come. Theseus' outsmarts Jason's old flame, Medea, who tries to poison the mind of Theseus' step-father, King Aegeas, as well as literally trying to poison Theseus himself. Then he volunteers to sacrifice himself in an attempt to stop the tithe of youths and maidens that King Aegeas makes to Crete every year, offerings that are fed to the Minotaur. Theseus, of course, slays the Minotaur with help from Minos' beautiful and crafty daughter, Ariadne (who may or may not practice Sorcery in the





Medean model), so he's quite charming too. Theseus' ultimate Fate lies in the death of his step-father and his love, Ariadne, both ironically through his own oversight and stubbornness. His father commits suicide, jumping into the sea, after Theseus forgets to change the color of his sails to signal his success (as opposed to his death). Likewise, Theseus abandons Ariadne along the way home, deciding he can't marry a woman who betrayed her own father and country. So Theseus Fate, in this way, is a model for the kind of self-destructiveness that was so common among Greek heroes.

▲ **The Minotaur:** A pretty basic monster, half-man, half-bull, and people-eating. The Minotaur was born of the mating of Minos' wife with a beautiful bull that she became mysteriously infatuated with. Yes, they have bestiality in the ancient world too. Supposedly, the Minotaur was strong enough to tear men in half and had the teeth of a predator in addition to its horns and hooves. While not dangerous when compared with most Super-Villains, the Minotaur was a match for many Classical heroes who fought without guns or eye-lasers. It also reflects the animalistic nature of most mythological monsters, which are often just giant, ill-tempered beasts, or a bunch of different human and animal parts stirred together.

▲ **The Labyrinth:** A great example of a non-living Mythic Entity, the Daedalean Labyrinth was supposedly so complex that those without the proper route would be killed, by the Minotaur, by the various traps and tortures, or simply by wasting away with no way out. Many modern notions of a "dungeon crawl" come from this Classical model. Daedalus, then, was the first "dungeon master" to put heroes through their paces. In any case, the Labyrinth could be built using *Argonauts* point-based system, just like a hero or

monster. You would buy super-powers and attributes for the Labyrinth like normal and simply use the resulting modifiers and abilities whenever the power and deviousness of the Labyrinth came into conflict with other Mythic Entities.

Not as good as full-blown stat blocks, I know, but hopefully that gives you some idea.

### Art & Artifice

The cover art for *Argonauts* will be handled by John Harper of Shooting Iron Designs/One.Seven Design Studio ([www.shootingiron.com/feng](http://www.shootingiron.com/feng)), while the interiors will be the responsibility of Antti Karjalainen ([www.kotiposti.net/xakarjala](http://www.kotiposti.net/xakarjala)). Some of John's early cover sketches and a few of Antti's illustrations have been sprinkled throughout this preview.

I plan to finish and publish the Alpha Version of *Argonauts* during the Winter of 2003. *Argonauts* will be released as a "progressive PDF," and a hardcopy version will follow in the Summer of 2004. What does this mean? Well, the Alpha Version will be sold as a \$3 PDF and will include a comprehensive list of Playtest Notes, asking specific questions on parts of the system that can only be illuminated through extensive play. Based on feedback from purchasers of *Argonauts*, there will be a Beta Version released in the Spring of 2004, including updated and expanded rules, play suggestions, example heroes, monsters, additional super-powers, and more. The Beta Version will be free to those who bought the Alpha Version and participated, in one way or another, in the post-Alpha playtest phase (for newcomers, the price will move up to \$5). Finally, the Gamma – or hardcopy – Version will be published next Summer, in time for Origins and GenCon, and will include additional material that did not appear in previous incarnations. Again, those who purchased earlier versions will be able to buy the print *Argonauts* at a discounted price.

### Questions & Comments

Got something you need to say? Feel free to email me personally: [Jonathan.Walton@oberlin.edu](mailto:Jonathan.Walton@oberlin.edu), and check out the soon-to-be-updated 1001 Designs website, ([1001.indie-rpgs.com](http://1001.indie-rpgs.com)), for more info on *Argonauts* and my other roleplaying projects, as well as webcomics and other fun stuff. Ω





# You do *what* for a living?

## A critical look at the economics of fantasy role-playing settings



Article by  
T.S. Luikart

T.S. Luikart lives in a cramped house in California that more than vaguely resembles a role-playing game library. He is responsible for (or is guilty of depending on your point of view) contributing to or designing such products as *UnderWorld*, *The Last Exodus*, *Promised Sands*, and *Skull & Bones*.

Since the first incarnation of *Dungeons & Dragons*, we've been told that many adventures begin when a hardy band of likely youths go traipsing forth to seek their fortunes out in the wide, cruel world. There's money to be had in the dark places of the globe and plenty of it if you're skilled or lucky. So why don't more folk turn to this lucrative career? Because it's dangerous? Because it's foolhardy? Because they'll have to kill a bunch of sentient beings? Nope. Because it's B.S. The economic foundations of most "fantasy heartbreakers" {thanks, Ron} are, quite frankly, not very sound. Over the last few years, I've become more and more interested in the study of economics as they apply to fantasy role-playing games. My interest began with a great deal of research I did for the (mostly) real world equivalent gold and silver prices you can find in Green Ronin's *Skull & Bones*, but it has since expanded to the hobby in general. The greater bulk of this article is directed at campaign settings that claim to be "realistic" but are anything but. Obviously, when depicting a fantasy world, you can do whatever you darn well please. I would like to note, however, that a number of the more famous fantasy authors I've read emphasize that the more "realistic" a fantasy world is, the more accepting of it and audience is capable of being.

### Economic Foundations

According to present anthropological thought, almost every culture begins as nomadic hunter – gatherers before acquiring the knowledge of crop cultivation and settling down into an agricultural society. Some tribes remain nomadic and/or proceed to raid others for their goods, depending on how aggressive they are. A culture can spend a very long time indeed using nothing more than a barter basis for their economy before ever needing to come up with interchangeable units of wealth, e.g. coins, shells,

teeth, etc. A number of cultures equate value with specific animals and how many an individual owns, so wealth is measured by the size of one's herd of cows, horses, buffalo, etc. Long after coinage was introduced in Europe, service "in kind" was the standard for well over a thousand years, as most peasants were unlikely to ever see more than a handful of silver coins in their entire life. Thus, they passed on part of their crops and a chicken or two when their lord asked for his rent. Coins eventually predominated in Europe mainly because of trade. Merchants, when dealing with folks they know, can continue to barter at a certain level, but when they start dealing with foreigners they need a unit of measurement whose value is, relatively, fixed and easy to agree upon.

I could continue on this topic for quite a while, but I'll steer back to my point: For-profit adventurers do not come from barter-based societies. A campaign world's society has to have hit a point where goods and economic units, e.g. "treasure," were in wide scale use for some time, either in the past or the present, for such adventurers to even exist. Fantasy campaigns based on Europe must inevitably have a Roman Empire equivalent in their past, or a truly thriving present economy, to explain how so many far-flung beasts got their claws on so much portable wealth, which leads to my next point.

### Where did all that specie come from?

Specie, in this case, is cold hard cash and for the sake of my sanity and your edification, we'll just assume it's all gold and silver. Coinage implies both a mint and ready sources of the material in question. Some places on Earth did, indeed, have gold and silver deposits on the surface, which required little to no mining, but they are the exception, not the rule. Extensive amounts of specie inevitably mean mining. Mining implies fairly formidable technology. It





is true that anybody can dig a hole, but the process of producing the proper tools for excavation, shoring up the mine's walls, transporting ore, etc. all require a fair amount of sophistication. However, a mineral rich environment and a large work force can also cull quite a bit from the earth. Slavery was frequently the main choice of labor for the Roman Empire, fantasy worlds may follow suit, but they also have access to golems, zombies, elementals, etc.

There has to be some sort of reason for needing large amounts of wealth dug from the earth. Trade and expansion are the mostly likely reasons our world has to offer. Trade demands other nations who have similar outlooks on what constitutes "wealth" and expansion means taking into account population growth and the absorption of other peoples into one's nation, e.g. there needs to be enough money to go around. Trade also means that large amounts of wealth get moved around, which is somewhat critical for the dissemination of wealth. How else do beasts in the wilderness get their hands on currency? Previous dead adventurers? Cynical economists will tell you that no matter how much wealth there is to be had that, given enough time, it will inevitably end up in the hands of a select few.

The Spanish Empire is pretty much Earth's poster child for ludicrous amounts of specie production. However, it didn't do half so well from its holdings in the New World as you might think. The costs of running and maintaining the Spaniard's world spanning empire were enormous. Every time a new load of silver specie arrived in port, there would be a shockwave of inflation that would radiate outwards throughout Europe as more silver was dumped into the economy. However, the heavy raise in prices would inevitably crush the local Spaniards first, who weren't benefiting from their ruler's oversea holdings. Eventually, they came to dread the arrival of the New World flotillas and stock up on basic goods when rumor of their arrival came around. Thus, the economic windfalls of the New World actually had a large part in bringing about the downfall of the Spanish Empire, making them victims of their own success.

## Oh, no! Adventurers!

Bet you can see where I'm going with this, eh? Adventurers, especially successful for-profit adventurers, while a boon to merchants are quite probably a bane to common folk. The vast amounts of wealth they carry with them can destabilize carefully built economies overnight. D&D d20 presumes a base wage of one silver piece per day to an unskilled laborer, which is barely adequate for survival. Presuming a 30 day month, with 5 days set aside as holy days, and a 12 month year, said laborer makes 300 silver, or 30 gold in a year. A 5<sup>th</sup> level adventurer is nominally worth 9,000 gold, in specie and equipment. In other words, it would take the ditch digger 300 years of money accumulation, presuming not a cent was spent on surviving, to reach the equivalent.

Is it any wonder that all old taverns seemed to be owned by ex-adventurers?

Adventurers are also one of the only ways through which incredible amounts of previously unavailable specie can suddenly enter an economy. Translation: dragon slayers are great news for the King's exchequer and bad news for everybody else. Let's consider Smaug the Golden in economic terms. I'm going to presume that Smaug was *very old* with a particularly impressive hoard. The result runs something like this: 100,000+ in loose gold, 100+ gems and art objects worth over 140,000 gold, 8 medium strength magic items worth approximately 80,000 gold and 6 major items worth approximately 240,000 gold. Grand total: 560,000+ in gold value, not to mention several tons of dwarf-wrought armor, weapons, etc. All of which is 200,000 gold less than the 760,000 gold equivalent that a 20<sup>th</sup> level adventurer is supposed to be worth according to the 3.5 d20 Dungeon Master's Guide.

Yep, that's right. A single (admittedly very high level) adventurer's money and equipment are worth more than a very old dragon's whole hoard. Which do you think is easier to kill, hmmm? Tolkien had it right, 5 armies would, indeed, march at the death of an elderly dragon—but a single high level adventuring party is even more valuable and probably easier to waylay.







### How much gold fer that there wand?

Giving magic items a gold piece equivalent, while useful as a game-balancing mechanic, was a really bad idea from a realistic economics point of view. It is true that supply and demand greatly increases the value of a given commodity, but hardly anybody would have enough hard cash to justify the costs of any of the mid-range magic items in d20, much less the more expensive ones. If you ever happen to find yourself in a position where you're coming up with a magic item system, I strongly suggest you connect their existence and the faint possibility of purchasing them to the rarity of materials and the difficulty of any given item's creation.

### So what's my point?

A lot of people, gamers and otherwise, tend to cringe if you start discussing economics, but thinking about the foundations of your world's finances can only enhance your campaign and/or game. The underlying structure can provide a lot of room for adventure, as can the interactions of cultures with different priorities. Say, for example, that you're GMing a game where the PCs all come from a Celtic style clan that only values how many heads of Yaerwen Cattle a man owns. Stealing cattle from other clans and making a good marriage are typically the only ways to improve one's fortune in their culture, so a few adventures, at least, would revolve around raiding and protecting their herd from the raids of others. Gold and silver acquisition wouldn't mean all that much to such warriors, until they find out that there are some fools that will actually *sell* Yaerwen Cattle for coins! Another common example, certainly the most common that I've seen in fantasy and science fiction, is environment influenced economy, e.g. desert areas or worlds. Water is always the most precious of substances and there are areas where no amount of gold will be able to purchase it.

Questions to consider:

*Is this a barter or specie culture?*

*Where did /does their money come from?*

*What does this culture / race value?*

*Why?*

**Dwarves and their gold. . . .**

Let's take one of my favorite races, dwarves, and build on a number of the more common conceptions about them with an eye towards economic implications. They live deep in the mountains. They have a clan-based structure that values honor. They love well-crafted goods and greatly value gold, silver, jewels and alcohol.

They live deep in the mountains for both spiritual reasons and the fact that it puts them far closer to the ore veins, which supply the raw materials for their smith work. They have the capacity to acquire gold, silver and jewels easier than most other races. If there is any race that would've produced their own coinage, surely, it's the dwarves. Living deep in the mountains means that they're either self-sufficient or have long since set up trade routes with others for any goods they cannot produce. Seeing as they have a large and expanding subterranean empire, I figure they must have established trade routes. Because of their well known reputation for honor, traders would be willing to deal with them regularly, however, they're probably known for being hard bargainers, for they value both their work and their gold highly. Work, however, can be replicated. Gold cannot. Thus, the mountain dwarves are far more likely to want to trade a shipment of dwarf-wrought arms and armor than their gold for goods from outside their kingdom.

So what do they need? They have access to wool from their mountain sheep. However, they need leather for a number of their goods and silk or other unusual cloths might interest them. They certainly need every kind of foodstuff, from meats to produce. Barley and hops for their beloved ales are absolutely essential, and probably one of the few things they'd be willing to trade gold for. Fruits coming from trees that will never grow in their cold high mountains are delicacies. I can easily imagine dwarves loving apples and swooning at the thought of a tumbler full of apple brandy.

Thus, we have a dwarf kingdom with a healthy internal economy based on specie and work. Among their fellows, they use gold and silver coinage to purchase goods, or trade one of their creations whose value is proportionate to





how much time and craftsmanship went into it. They prefer to keep their specie in dwarven hands, so most of their agreements with outside traders involving the selling of dwarf-wrought goods, though certain crops will pry some of their specie away. Citizens of the kingdoms surrounding the dwarf mountains are far more likely to have seen a fine masterwork axe than a dwarven silver penny. Characters wishing to purchase wares from the dwarves are better off acquiring a couple of bushels of apples. The dwarves would certainly take gold without compunction, though they would make a better deal on jewels that they didn't have in their mountains, such as opals or pearls.

I hope my musings were of interest. I'll leave you with China Miéville's awesome take on for-profit adventurers:

*They were immediately and absolutely recognizable as adventurers. ... They were hardy and dangerous, lawless, stripped of allegiance or morality, living off their wits, stealing and killing, hiring themselves out to whoever and whatever came. They were inspired by dubious virtues.*

*A few performed useful services: research, cartography and the like. Most were nothing but tomb raiders. They were scum who died violent deaths, hanging on to a certain cachet among the impressionable through their undeniable bravery and their occasionally impressive exploits.*

—China Miéville, *Perdido Street Station*

Ω

trade the pointy hats for x caps



Trade the guilds for gangs and the staffs for Glock's.  
Trade the folklore for funk and the history for hip-hop.  
Trade tomes for CDs, bards for DJs. Trade minstrels  
for MCs. Trade what you think is going on  
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# World design, block by block

I'm sitting on the floor before a big plastic tub of LEGO. The tub is about two feet high and four feet across. It's clear-ish in that way plastic tubs are universally clear-ish. It holds several thousand assorted bricks. Instructions are lost to the whims of time.

Today, although I am thirty years old, I am going to build something neat.

I have two choices, two predestined paths before I thrust my hands into the giant bin and pull out heaps and heaps of small plastic pieces.

The first path is the path of Zen. I grab several bricks and click them together in a logical way. What begins as a bit of a house with some walls becomes a house on large, ponderous wheels and pairs of small LEGO anti-aircraft machine guns on a hinged roof. Inside, tuxedoed minifigs carrying trays of hors d'oeuvres serve fighting pirates ready to fight all the other giant wheeled armed houses of the post-apocalyptic basement floor. It's the Mad Max of LEGO, Beyond the LEGODome, a nightmarish conflagration of pieces and parts bringing a vision to life.

The second path is the path of Meditation. I sort and shift the pieces before me into categories and parts and groups of color. I ponder the numbers of wheels and wings and parts of appropriate size and build. And then, I come up with a Grand Scheme, a super plan bringing all my LEGO dreams to fruition. I cackle. Perhaps I even model my plan on my renderer on my computer, and have it spit out step-by-step instructions. (I have software that does this precise thing.) Once I have fiddled and changed and edited and planned, I build. What I build is complicated and difficult and uses many fiddly parts. The end result is perfection: a fully motorized minifig death machine, destined for small plastic doom. Days of work, and it stands before me, great and proud.

Some say the first path is more fun, but the second path is more satisfying.

## RPG building blocks

Role-playing games aren't actually LEGO blocks—there are no plastic bits to leave on the carpet for unsuspecting toes. But building games is not unlike building the grand machine of plastic death. In the universe of actual World Building, two approaches come to the fore: start at the very center and work out, or start out and work in. This is the "Bottom-Up" approach versus the "Top-Down" approach, respectively.

The most common method of constructing a world by game masters is the "bottom-up" approach. The game master (or designer or what have you) is faced with a collection of objects—characters, NPCs, villains, objects, maps, monsters, etc. Some he swipes from other game systems. Others, he makes up out of whole cloth. He starts at a small place: a village, a house, a small dungeon. The game begins with the handful of people, places and things. Everything outside this small area is grayed out—yet to be explored. Yet, it exists by consensus.

As the game progresses, and the game master adds to the world, he tacks on new parts helter-skelter. Even the best-organized game master spontaneously generates bits of inconsistency, spawning the well known "That's not quite right—didn't we meet this guy in another form last week?" effect. It is the weaving and interweaving of characters and places where some earlier details are forgotten. Some parts of the world become disjointed. Notes are lost. Bits of potato chips collect on the floor.

A town here, a dungeon there ... for most games, it's perfectly fine. Especially if the game is short, or limited in scope, or segues into a well-documented area, like published and canned material. But some games turn into a large wheeled monstrosity with anti-aircraft guns on the roof. The game lacks proper scope—not knowing the great outdoors until we all venture outside and are promptly eaten by bears.



**Article by  
Emily K. Dresner-  
Thornber**

Emily K. Dresner-Thornber has written for numerous publications including *Pyramid Magazine*, *In Nomine*, *Kindred of the East*, *Vampire: Dark Ages*, and *Big Eyes, Small Mouth*, including *Cute and Fuzzy Seizure Monsters*. Currently, she spends more time writing small games than playing them.





### Think big

The other approach is considerably more difficult and time consuming. It's also what we, the great unwashed gaming populace, pay for at the game store. Starting from absolute scratch, or using some ready-but-unusual resources, the game master assesses the entire world, starts from the outside and works in. He envisions an entire world, and populates it with people, items, places, things, history, and politics in smaller and smaller circles before the players even sit down to create their characters. The result is a very detailed playground.

Starting from a clean slate, a game master asks, "What do I want in my world?" And then he starts writing (or indexing or populating a database), and does a little research to fill in the areas that need a little coloring in.

The easiest way to do top-to-bottom world building approach is to ask several questions and write down the actual answers. For example:

**Setting:** Can I imagine a world full of countries and populate it with races of the correct genre and feeling? Can I describe my setting in a few sentences without referring to specifics? What is my world, precisely?

**Geography:** How do my countries look? Do they bump against each other? Do they have giant mountain ranges as boundaries, or immense rivers of blood? Cartography software or fractal generator software is useful for generating a country, a continent or a world. It generates random, natural looking land with rivers and other physical features to lay out boundaries.

**History:** Now that I can see my world visually before me and infer some political boundaries. Which groups have been at war? Which are allied? Which shares resources? How has the lay of the land contributed to the history? Imagine the history of the world in chunks: 10,000 years ago, 1000 years ago, 100 years ago, last year, last month. Imagine the phases of change over time. Have they always hated each other? Who populated these lands when, and why?

**Religion:** What do the people believe? Is there one god? Many? Do they believe in the ultimate coming of some evil or an uncaring God from beyond understanding? Is existentialism the

reigning philosophy? Who believes what, and why do they believe it? Religion can tie very neatly into history—defining changing political boundaries, the backing of holy wars, and millennia-old racial tensions.

**Politics:** With the political boundaries of countries and their religions, what kind of governments do these countries have? Are they theocracies? Are they ruled by iron-fisted kings who repress their people and push forward the dogs of war? Are they constitutional monarchies with the state held in careful political balance of secret infighting and collusions across borders? Is the entire world descending into post-apocalyptic anarchy?

**Dramatis Personae:** With a setting, countries, a history, religions, and the political landscape, the world needs important people—movers and shakers the players might or might not care about. Build convincing non-player characters, give them histories and motivations of their own, and let them go.

The above points collude to an Earth-like fantasy world, although it works with some modifications with everything from Steampunk to the Ancient World to Space Opera. And to show how this works, here is a small, mostly incomplete example.

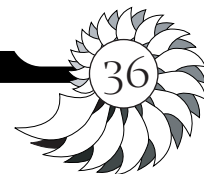
### This old house

Instead of starting from a more difficult point—designing a universe, or a world, or a country—let's start with something simple.

Imagine a house.

I start with the setting. Then I add the political dynamics, and flesh out some of the history. Now, with three simple steps I have where, who, and why for any game I wish to set. The world is bounded by the house. While theoretically there is a road and it leads to a town and the town has people, it's not interesting to the story, and therefore does not exist.

**Setting:** A House out in the woods, slightly smaller than a rambling Victorian mansion, yet too large to be a generic split-level ranch. It's one of those big, named houses crumbling off some forgotten lane, a heaping relic of a forgotten time. Behind the house are some untended, over-







grown rose gardens and a small creek. Down the lane a ways is civilization.

**Geography:** The House is a large, multi-level affair built in a much earlier time with large banisters and dark corners. It's complete with a basement, a large formal dining room, several bedrooms upstairs, and an attic. Who knows what's in the attic? Old, forgotten servant and slave chambers are off the large kitchen.

Everything in the House smacks of age, growth, and mold. It's old. Old as the gnarled trees outside the windows. Old as the day and the night.

Outside are a small creek and a giant rose garden. Down by the creek is a small family graveyard. All is overgrown with ivy and time.

That which is beyond the house does not matter. While there is a road and some people come in and some people leave as needed, there is never any reason to follow the road to some other world—or at least not desired. Why would you ever leave the protection of the House?

**Politics:** The House is run by the Grand Matron of the House, old Theodosia. She holds the household in an iron grip, supported by her sister, Henrietta. After this come the aunts and uncles and children populating the House like rats—and acting much the same. Sometimes new people are brought into the House through marriage—met in some mysterious way, arranged by old Theodosia and married into the Family. Sometimes people just disappear.

All the rest—the uncles, the aunts, and the cousins—jockey for Theodosia's attentions and desires through their own internal politics. Whoever has the favor has the most attention, and can lord over the others their control. Whoever is out of favor may be dismissed from the protection of the House, never to return.

**History:** The history of the family itself is a story of inbreeding and murder and bloody secret ritual.

The history of the House goes back far beyond Theodosia, to her grandfather, Thaddaus, an evil old man who built the House on the time of a great confluence of powers between the Heavens and the forgotten God Iadalath, oft referenced in forgotten alchemical

texts of the Middle Ages. He sanctified the cornerstone of the basement with blood of those relatives who refuse worship Iadalath in a ritual of murder and suffering, holding up the Trimethius as his guide. After building the House, he only allowed those who truly believed in the cult to survive. Forthwith, it brought the family great Wealth and Power in times of yore.

Perhaps not by murder, but terminal accidents happen within the family with an uncomfortable frequency. Uncle Joseph's wife Laura drowned in the creek. Aunt Marcia tragically fell from the window of the attic. And children mysteriously died after the conjunctions of Mars and Saturn.

Although Thaddaus is dead and buried in the graveyard by the stream, Theodosia still lives on, practicing Thaddaus's rituals. Those of the family who have survived through the years have lived through currying Theodosia's favor while remembering Thaddaus's forgotten god. The power of the House is waning; only renewed ritual will bring it back into power.

### To Do

Flesh out the history to have a timeline so players can dig up truth about the world as they play. Fill out the names of the assorted uncles and aunts and determine their relationships. Build a family tree full of inbreeding and murder. Draw a plan of the House and the surrounding grounds.

### The Game

The setting demands a creepy conspiracy game to escape the house to the outside. Obviously, this is not a long running game, but it has a setting, a history, and people to populate the world with motivations and lives. The players would best play children—grandchildren of Theodosia. Then, the game master can relish offering up bits and pieces of their history and the plotting of their elder relatives to keep them from escaping the House.

We have a place (the House) for a Setting, some evil History to expand upon, and some surrounding Geography to give the players someplace to go and something to do. So far, no players have created characters. But everything is ready for the players should they play. If the





game master completely fills out the world, finishing the exercise, the players will jump him with fewer surprises. He'll also create a richer tapestry of game for the players to game in.

### Too small, too large, just right

Certainly, in the above example, there is an outside world, and in the top-down world creation process, if it was important to build outside towns, we'd start with a town (containing the House) and work in. If it was important for the characters to travel to a city, we'd start with a state, build some towns (one containing the House) and work in. But for this example, the entire world is the House—and all the evil therein. Although this may feel constraining, several books, including Stephen King's *Misery* and *The Shining*, and V.C. Andrew's *Flowers in the Attic*, have been set entirely inside a house to great effect.

Small is good, however. Trying to build a world over-ambitiously may mean too much work, too much scope, and not enough focus. There is too much information to assimilate and write down, and not enough time in the day. A large world can be built from the top-down approach, and it's preferable for a long-term campaign or a book. But, small is manageable. It is just enough to chew and swallow.

Most game masters won't want to put this amount of work and effort into a game, but a good game designer must if the game designer is building a convincing setting or world. If other people are to play in the big box of LEGO without the designer standing over them and holding a whip, the world must fit together in a way that is easy to understand and believable.

### The Realized World

One of the stumbling blocks of putting all the pieces together in a top-down approach is to build something plausibly realistic yet still stays within the intended theme. Staying in theme is

crucial. If a Space Opera is suddenly interrupted by warriors from Conan breaking through the airlock because the game designer was watching *Conan The Destroyer* while working on the game world, the interruption strains the suspension of belief. Unless the world plausibly demands, for whatever reason, that space barbarians be a part of the world, the barbarians shouldn't be included in the game design.

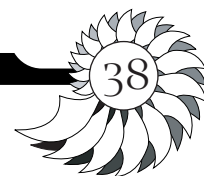
When working on a world from the top down, keep underlying themes in mind. These include the timeframe, the races, and the progress of scientific invention. Keep races and their interaction in mind. If the steam engine has yet to be invented, it should not appear in the history of the world, nor should it suddenly be included in an invading army's arsenal without good reason.

The final, secret trick to true top-down world building is keeping the project in scope. The world remains believable as long as the designer doesn't throw in everything, and then some, into the design. Simple is best. Temptation wags its little fingers at any game designer – the devil himself causes fledgling game designers and neophyte game masters to see piles of neat shiny things and shove them willy-nilly into a game where they don't belong.

### The End Product

The end product is, for me, a completed LEGO abstraction of plastic bricks. I will take a few digital photos, share my design, and perhaps bother to tell people for a few days. Games are much the same, although in words and concepts instead of physical: parts and pieces carefully planned to build a coherent whole.

If the designer does put in the work, he or she will be satisfied in the end. The designer will walk away from the process with a complete product in a neat package to either run a private game or share with the greater and more wonderful world. Ω





# Improvisation techniques for gamers

## Shed your fears and open your mind to better play



### Article by Pete Darby

Pete Darby has been noodling about with RPG's for about 21 years, but previously confined his published contribution to the field to arguing badly on the internet. Now he is bald, thirty something, overweight and shortsighted, he feels it is time to become a proper RPG writer.

**I**mpro: *Improvisation and the Theatre* by Keith Johnstone, for those who haven't been bored to tears by old drama queens, is an amazing book, ostensibly about acting and story telling.

So what? Why should Impro matter to role-players? Because *Impro* is practical, fun, and, by itself, is virtually a freeform game players handbook. Here are my views of how the ideas in *Impro* can help you in your role-playing hobby.

### Harnessing Spontaneity

In *Impro*, Johnstone reckons there are three main things that stop people from being creatively spontaneous:

- 1) Fear of psychosis
- 2) Fear of obscenity
- 3) Fear of unoriginality.

I'm not entirely sure the first two aren't aspects of the same thing, which is fear of being strange, crazy, or unacceptably different. Ironically, trying to break away from those leads to his third fear—fear of being boring and normal.

The first fears—the fears of being alienated—lead to people playing it safe with their characters and games. So, we go back to the same old habits and the same old adventures and adventures, this time dressed up in new costumes, names, races and powers.

Conversely, the last fear—the fear of being bored or boring—leads to that old favourite, “acting crazy.” Everyone's had that one member of the gaming group who has to do something suicidal or inappropriate because he says, “I'm bored,” or, “My character would do that.”

Let's look at those first two fears. They indicate we'll be discovered by others as crazy, or perverts, or crazy perverts. A small word to the wise—our hobby mostly consists of getting together with people we tend to know fairly well, then immediately pretend to be other people. Most “standard” behaviour for an adventuring party, as remarked by many designers and commentators, would be seen as illegal, immoral and borderline psychotic behavior. A standard role-playing session includes the use of techniques of fantasizing in a social context that many psychiatrists only recommend to be used under the supervision of highly trained therapists.

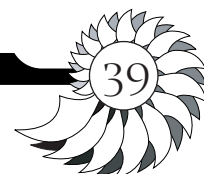
In other words, we're already acting crazy.

### People are strange

I'm going out on a limb here: Playing role-playing games will not drive you crazy. If you're worried that playing role-playing games will reveal that you're odd, well, you're already odd for playing role-playing games in the first place. Don't sweat it. But, maybe you're not as odd as people who try to conceal their oddness by never trying anything odd. That's downright weird! Trying to conceal how you're mentally different from the other players is not only detrimental to your fun, but it's also detrimental to theirs. And trying to demonstrate how you're mentally different (whether more artistic, or funny, or just plain “wacky”) tends to demonstrate nothing more than your desperate need to hide your fear of normality.

As for worrying about being dull or unoriginal, consider this. There's a grand old tradition that says there are only a dozen or so plot lines, and they've been done a million times each.

**“Trying to conceal how you're mentally different from the other players is not only detrimental to your fun, but it's also detrimental to theirs.”**





There are only a couple of dozen possible basic character traits. On a grand, cosmic scale, you can't be original. Or, at least, you can't be original be comprehended by the rest of humanity.

So, I don't think anything you do in a role-playing game is going to expose you as being any stranger than the average gamer, or indeed the average member of the public.

To give you an example of "normal" people, among the guys I work with are two flight simulation nuts, a gentleman who turned down the attentions of his wife to play a video game, a tropical fish enthusiast, a train enthusiast, a martial artist, and a guy who has more DVD space than clear wall space. Some of these "enthusiasts" are the same person. That's just the stuff I can tell you about that's legal. And all of them tease each other for their idiosyncrasies. Since I started working, I've been pretty up front about my hobby, and they've given up teasing me because I don't get defensive. But, call the train enthusiast a train spotter, and hooo boy!

There will always be a lot of interest in how much role-playing games reveal about you. And, sure, when you look back on your characters and games, you can gain a certain amount of insight into your own real-life character. But either analysing while playing or skewing your play to try to display or conceal your personality just cramps your playing style. Doing so distracts your attention from the game and having fun. Besides, what can you possibly learn about yourself if you don't let yourself go?

### Good enough, right now!

Here's where we come to the great, unifying characteristic that links impro theatre to role-playing: immediacy. The other players in a role-playing game and the audience of an impro (and the other improvisers!) don't want a perfect response in a week's time. They want a *good enough* response *right now*!

You can at least partially assess a good system for a given group of players by finding out what results the system mechanically produces in what time frame. An "imagineer" player may be more comfortable with a longer wait to consult tables. A challenge-seeker may gladly wait a bit to check

the effects of new tactics. And, the player prioritizing story or theme may pause long enough to refer to a relationship map of characters involved in a scene. All of these are part and parcel of the "good enough" part of the response.

What role players and improvisers can't stand is the response "I don't know." In impro, it more often takes the form of the phrase "I can't think of anything." At least role-players have the crutch of mechanical game system results to fall back on. "I can't think of anything" is usually code for "All I can think of is weird, perverse or dull stuff, and I want you all to think of me as fascinatingly normal." This is the impossible thing of Impro.

A liberating phrase that Johnstone advises is "Heh ... I'm not saying that!" It acknowledges that you've got an idea, but one that you feel will either be unacceptable to the group or to yourself. But that phrase (as well as its paraphrases) has two interesting consequences. The first is that it becomes easier to accept what's constantly running through your head because you recognise that you don't know where a lot of it comes from, and you're not responsible for the contents, just the expression. Secondly, you get used to hearing the phrase, "Go on then ... what?" Once you've made it plain that you've already said you didn't want to say it, it kind of makes the responding person mutually responsible for the expression of the idea. You'll be initially surprised at how little you get the response "You're right, you shouldn't have said that," and how often you get "Heh ... why not?"

### Offering, blocking and accepting

The most basic tools of an improviser are Offering, Accepting and Blocking. These terms are jargon for some very simple things, but labeling them as such brings a level of awareness that illuminates proceedings.

Offering is simply providing a hook, or a statement, for another performer to react to. It should be fairly obvious what Accepting and Blocking are in this context. In a free-form theatre improvisation, blocking is generally held to be Very Bad, but it's also a default defensive tactic. If we're afraid of where another improviser







may be leading us, we instinctively block. If we're invested in the illusion of not breaking character, as most performing improvisers are, it's about the only way to express discomfort with another improviser's actions.

The example Johnstone gives is as follows:

Actor 1: I've brought the elephant

Actor 2: For the gelding?

Actor 1: NO!

Actor 1 offers, Actor 2 accepts and offers, and the Actor 1 blocks. Perhaps understandably, but it's to the dismay of the audience and the other actor.

### How role-playing games differ

Role-playing games tend to have a more pre-defined universe in which events occur. Role-playing games also accept at least a few restrictions in terms of simulation. Also, they do not restrict participants choices to "in-character" plausibility (most improvisations are so restricted). Finally, role-playing games must acknowledge the social contract and boundaries of a group, which often intends to play together for an extended period of time rather than one isolated session.

These differences mean that role-playing games, by and large, are far less free-form than improvisation sessions. The basic technique of "accept everything" that keeps improvisations flowing so freely, such that they seem the products of telepathy between performers, shouldn't be used in pure form when playing role-playing games.

### Never say no

This is where rules such as *Nobilis*' Monarda Law arise: "Never say No." It seems strange to the traditional role-player, if only because explicit blocking of other players offers is often the primary form of interaction between players and the game master. "You can't do that because ..." The Monarda law clarifies itself by defining the ways you can say yes: "Yes," "How," "You Can Try," and "Yes, but . . ."

If we break these down into offering, blocking and accepting, we can see that only "Yes" is an unconditional acceptance. "How" is actually a form of blocking, a challenge to the stated

action, as in "Give me a more acceptable or interesting offer." "You can try" is acceptance of the offer not as a completed action, but as a statement of intent. "Yes, but . . ." is an acceptance and offer; that part of the story goes ahead, and creates a further development.

The very mechanic of offering blocking and accepting is the basis of some games, notably *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* and *Pantheon* from Hogshead Publishing. *Pantheon* works by having players build a story one sentence at a time. A written sentence is accepted by default by the other players. In order to block, players must wager or commit limited resources. In *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*, there is a slight reverse, in that the block to another players' offer (which can be any part of their monologue) *must* consist of a wager of a limited resource and an offer of an element to be accepted by the active player. A simple block is not available to a player wishing to interrupt, though the active player may block the interrupting offer (at the risk of their own limited resource).

*The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen* presumes an 18<sup>th</sup> century European milieu for much of its style, but there is no mechanical restraint on this. *Pantheon*'s various scenarios reward genre tropes and clichés in the scoring endgame, but out-of-genre offers are mechanically no different from in genre offers. They differ from many role-playing games in that there is virtually no simulation, no "reality checking" beyond what the players will allow. I feel that this is part and parcel with their "acceptance by default" mechanisms; once checking against plausibility comes in, you impose (sometimes small) barrier to the free-wheeling creativity that these games thrive on.

In more traditional role-playing games, this free wheeling creativity can be very rewarding. Players can benefit significantly by changing their unconscious behaviors from blocking to accepting and offering.

Of course, this creativity can be abused. Players may find their characters taking paths they neither intended nor wished to tread. This is a problem the average improviser doesn't





often face, given the lack of continuing characters and artistic freedom granted performers. Stage improvisers tend not to get attached to the “guy on a park bench” they just portrayed, and often they don’t invest much in the way of preparation time or longer term goals, unlike many carefully constructed player characters.

Thankfully, role-players have a couple of tools most improvisers don’t. Most especially, they have an understanding with fellow players, a social agreement on how and why the game is played. If need be, the group can “roll back” a game to before a problematic offer was made. The price is that players lose many of the benefits that automatic acceptance offers, but if it keeps people playing, and enjoying playing, I’ll take that any day.

However, don’t abandon spontaneity. Getting rid of the fear of psychosis, obscenity, and mundaneness mainly consists of treating what pops into your mind as another offer to be accepted or blocked according to the needs of the game. And, according to Johnstone, releasing creativity mainly consists of changing your default attitude to offers from blocking to accepting, at least within a creative context like a role-playing game.

### Story building skills

Johnstone’s guide to building stories is one of the simplest methods I’ve ever seen. It has only two techniques—breaking routines and re-incorporation.

### Breaking routines

Every story begins with a routine being broken. Johnstone’s favourite example is the movie *The Last Detail*, where military police bringing a deserter in across country decide to turn the trip into a final binge. Other examples include Hamlet (a prince in mourning is visited by the ghost of his father urging revenge), Red Riding Hood (a girl going to grandma’s meets wolf), and Spiderman (a high school nerd is granted super-powers). In each case, an easily established pattern is broken, and the act of breaking the pattern causes a level of dramatic tension, because hey, that shouldn’t happen!

Of course, before you break a pattern, you need to establish the pattern. In fantastic set-

tings, this can take some time. That’s why Tolkien starts *Lord of the Rings* with a long sequence in the Shire. He shows what’s at stake in the war, but more importantly he establishes what these short fellows do normally. That makes the bearing of the ring across a continent so much more remarkable.

Failure to break patterns can be a source of great frustration, especially to role-players. One of the most famous routines in role-playing games is the cyberpunk double-cross. The Johnson who hired you for a job is actually out to kill you and take your stuff. Apart from stretching the bounds of credibility (if the underworld really worked like that, it would collapse in a week), it forces players into the high farce of either going along with it, which makes them look like idiots, or taking the only sensible course of action, and killing anyone who offers them a job (with thanks to *The Critical Miss* team for that particular example of actual play.) The problem here is that the wrong routine has been established, and isn’t being broken.

That’s another creativity tool. If things are looking “too damn quiet,” it’s because the routine has been established, and it has, well, become routine. Break the routine, and do it now!

So your routine’s broken, now what? Well, you’ll probably find yourself, after a short while in another routine. Hey, remember those dozen or so stories? You’ve just jumped from one of them, what did you expect? Well, take heart that at least this routine is likely to be a little more interesting. But apart from that, the rule in improvisation is to keep with a routine until just before it ceases to be interesting. Yes, just before, and no, there’s no way of knowing for sure. Again, a routine needs to be developed long enough to be identifiable. Once it’s broken we can see that something’s changed.

The game master in most role-playing games has the most latitude to break things up, but bored, frustrated players shouldn’t let someone else have all the routine-breaking fun. Even if you don’t want to take things in a direction you’re afraid will ruin everyone else’s game (breaking the routine by, say, firing tear gas into the Vatican for no good reason), a routine can be gently broken.





## Reincorporation

So you're happily hacking away at routines whenever they get too established, and everyone's on their toes inventing stuff like no tomorrow. But, now your campaign is looking like the weakest, most baffling moments of "Twin Peaks." It may be art, but it's ceasing to be fun.

This is where re-incorporation comes in. You take hold of some stuff you're no longer using, and you put it back in. Chances are it'll have been part of a discarded routine. So much the better. The way that stories end, according to Johnstone, is that everything used so far has been used up. Every element is destroyed, returned to an old routine, or recast in a new routine. Hamlet ends with everyone, apart from the guy mentioned in passing in the opening scene, dead. Red Riding Hood ends with the wolf dead at the hands of a woodcutter mentioned in passing earlier. Spiderman ends with the villain dead, and Spiderman established in a new routine of lone superhero.

Now, if you're looking to have a successful, invigorating campaign, that's what to aim for. In a longer term campaign, you get a more "soap opera" effect, where no routine is safe from being broken (even death), but there's a constant re-incorporation of elements to keep the world from seeming too bizarre. Re-incorporation gives players a feeling, however illusionary, that there are some things that are, like them, continuing through the shared imaginative space, despite the constant breaking of routines. Even in wildly different adventures, the appearance of old elements can be comforting or disturbing. Either way,

events are bound to be interesting for the players.

Re-incorporation is not just a technique for game masters. In a game where players can introduce elements into the game world (and most do, even in a limited fashion), it's usually easier to get a re-incorporated element accepted than a newly invented one.

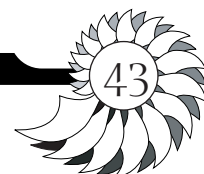
People often enjoy re-incorporation more so than the creation of an entirely new plot element. It's somehow more satisfying to find an old college pal in the dungeons of the insect god than some heretofore-unknown character, especially if the college pal cropped up as a throw-away plot feed two game sessions ago.

I especially like this method of story creation, because it works in the opposite fashion to most advice. Rather than starting with asking what story you want to create, then bending everything to create that, this technique launches play into the wilderness. Through re-incorporation, the technique manages to make play look far more planned than it appears. Where Chekhov famously stated that a gun hanging on the mantle in the first act must be fired in the third, Johnstone instead says "If you've mentioned a gun in the first act, it suggests someone will be shot later. Wait until everyone's forgotten about it."

## By the book

The most important thing I can do for any role-player of more freeform tendencies is to urge them to get Johnstone's book.

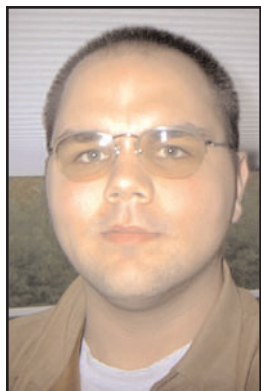
*Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* by Keith Johnstone, available now at the publisher's Web site: [www.methuen.co.uk/impro.html](http://www.methuen.co.uk/impro.html). Ω





JEUX NE SAIS QUOI

# This just in: Your favorite game sucks



Column by  
Jason L. Blair

Jason's first game design, *Little Fears*, was a critical and commercial success for his company Key 20 Publishing that went on to be nominated for a Best RPG of 2001 Origins Award. His next game, *Wyrd is Bond*, is set for release in early 2004. After that, he will be tackling the re-release of *Justifiers*, the very first game he ever played. Jason lives in a suburb of Cleveland, Ohio with his wife, daughter, chinchilla, two dogs y dos tortugas.

If you've spent enough time online in gaming forums or chat rooms, you've probably heard that before. Of course no one game will suit everyone—but why does there appear to be so much open hostility toward some games? Especially, it would seem, your favorite game?

There are many reasons for this, and, in fact, I'm going to go over some of them below. Maybe at the end we'll find out which games actually do suck and which ones don't.

## Fight or Flight Pattern

There's a school of thought that humans as a group will inherently draw into a pattern of comfort and familiarity. Anything that disrupts that comfort or obscures that familiarity will elicit a negative response. The greater the discomfort or alienation, the more negative the response.

Gamers, if no one else, seem to follow this pattern. To throw some completely anecdotal information at you, I know a guy who has been playing only *Axis and Allies* for at least a decade. He has no interest whatsoever in playing anything else. It's not that he hates the other games. (How can he? He's never played them.) He just happens to really like *Axis and Allies*.

There's nothing expressly wrong with this outlook. There exists no mandate that people must play a variety of games. As long as the person isn't spewing bile about games they've never played, it's a pretty harmless viewpoint.

But let's look at another camp: There are gamers who are miserable in their current groups because the other players only want to play *Dungeons & Dragons*. Those gamers recognize that *Dungeons & Dragons* is not a bad game—they're just tired of playing it. They crave something new, some different.

This is a classic example of group dysfunction. If you've played in the same group long enough, you (or someone else at the table) has probably experienced it. These people need to get out and

find another group—if their current group can't be persuaded to try something different.

Then there's the third camp: The hateful, bitter camp. The ones who only play *Axis and Allies* because "every other game sucks." The ones who only play *Dungeons & Dragons* because "they can't be bothered to learn something new." They are a cowardly and superstitious lot, and it's best not to look directly at them.

This stance is really just ignorant hand-waving and doesn't amount to a whole lot. Frankly, there's no argument for or against it. It's just yabbering, and best left alone if the person cannot be educated otherwise. If you are a person from the second camp and are surrounded by people in the third camp: Get out. Get out now.

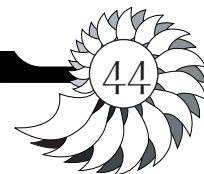
## Dis Game ith Buh-woken

Gamers will often malign something they construe as being broken. But in terms of games, what does "broken" mean? As far as I'm concerned there are only two definitions that fit here: "The game doesn't do what it says it does!" and "This game doesn't do what I want it to do!"

Let's address the first one. It's a pretty basic concept that a game should do what the subtitle and adcopy say it does. "Yes, I do want to play demonic soldiers in a shoujo manga-inspired Rome while being able to use all these nifty Sword & Sorcery Studios sourcebooks I own. I think ApollyoNominataQuest d20 is the game for me!" If the person buys ANQ d20 and finds out it only has rules for creating the lesser-known members of the Getalong Gang, then the game is "broken" from a marketing perspective.

If the game promises "brand-new revolutionary magic rules" and is really just filled with bad photocopies of the spell lists from AD&D Second Edition, then it is "broken" from a whole different perspective.

Does a broken promise equal a broken game?







No. The mechanics may function beautifully for the design they express—even if they’re not supported by the rest of the book. Let’s be honest, the “world” is just window dressing for the system. Like it or not, your favorite game is probably a generic system even if it’s not sold as one. When you buy a game, you typically buy two things: the mechanics and the world. The former can be used for pretty much anything and the world just does the buyer’s research and/or imagining (or at least the first steps) for them. But that’s a different column.

The second type of “broken” isn’t the matter of a broken promise but broken expectations. From what I’ve observed this is the number-one-with-a-bullet reason most people get pissed off at a game. In fact, it’s pandemic across all media. “Man, ‘The Sum of All Fears’ is the worst romantic comedy ever.” “ ‘The Matrix’ really fails as a period piece about the trials of forbidden Victorian love.” “

‘Vivaldi’s Four Seasons’ is a terrible compilation of rock ballads.” When something fails to meet your expectations, your reaction is usually very contrarian. So whose fault is that? Most of the time, yours.

I’m not talking about a game that doesn’t match what all the adcopy says. That’s the marketers’ fault, as we discussed earlier. I’m talking about the public’s expectations of what a game should be. As a designer, I’m interested in creating the game that interests me. If I’m not jazzed by the idea then the follow-through will be lackluster at best. As a consumer, you’re interested in buying the game that interests you. If you’re not jazzed by the idea then you feel your money is wasted.

Now, I’m a consumer also. When I buy something I want to be inspired; that’s my primary pocketbook motivator. If I buy something and I am not inspired, I don’t fault the purchase. We’re just not a good match. Because of this, I don’t get pissed off when someone likes Chuck Palahniuk’s novel “Choke.” I didn’t like it, but I know others

who did. Okay, so be it. I feel the same way about games. Despite some people’s beliefs, it’s okay to not like something. That does not however automate fault to the “thing.”

All of that is a matter of receipt failing to match expectations. Just because something doesn’t do what you want it to do doesn’t mean it’s broken. There are some of you out there that need to repeat the previous line as a mantra.

### A matter of mechanics

Oh yes, this old chestnut. Many a debate and flamewar has erupted because of one’s cry that Game X’s mechanics are broken, broken, broken. See, this one is tricky. You have to get into some math that, frankly, I’m not too comfortable with. I have people who check my odds for me to make sure my designs match my goals, and I like it that way. Perhaps there are “broken” mechanics, but who’s to say?

You can’t tell me a mechanic is broken unless you know the designer’s purpose. I have a suspicion that some of the people who point to a certain ruleset as broken are using that elusive yard-

stick called “reality.” Woe are they. Reality is not a valid measurement, nor is it a suitable design goal (my opinion here, people). I’m not saying reality can not be great inspiration, however. The InterLock system from *Cyberpunk 2.0.2.0* is a fine example of a nifty mechanic heavily inspired by reality and real-world principles.

Once you are certain of the designer’s mechanic and emulative intent then I may concede a certain level of “breakage.” After all, if a designer expressly states she wanted a game where players would succeed 75% of the time and then made it impossible for a player to succeed more than 10% of the time, the designer failed. But then it would be a matter of broken execution and not necessarily true that the game is broken. Instead, the designer just failed to meet her own goal.

**“As a designer, I’m interested in creating the game that interests me. If I’m not jazzed by the idea then the follow-through will be lackluster at best.”**





**The following line is true.  
The previous line was false.**

So when is a game broken? When it doesn't match its own logic. A game is an abstraction, not a treatise on the principles of existence. A game doesn't have to make sense in the "real world" but it should follow its own laws. If it doesn't, then it may very well be broken. Notice the lack of quotations. In the end, a game being able to abide by its own rules is what truly matters.

**Controversial, my ass!**

Some games are disliked not because they are "broken" and/or the gamer is xenophobic but because they tackle subjects that a certain audience would rather they not. Trust me, I know whence I speak. For some reason, in doing so, these games upset some gamers so much that those gamers think no one should deal with the subject and anyone who does is some twisted deviant pervert (\*cough\*cough\*) but I digress.

Perhaps they have a point. Perhaps games that approach the subject of child abuse, brutal power-mongering, and domineering sexuality have no place in the gaming market. However, the sole gauge of that is the buying audience. Last I checked, *Little Fears*, *Unknown Armies*, and *Vampire: the Masquerade* sold pretty damn well.

Right about here someone usually brings up that most fantasy gaming centers around wanton destruction, thievery, and genocide. This argument assumes that wanton destruction, thievery, and genocide are of the same quality, caliber, and level of appropriateness as abuse, powermongering, and sexuality. Are they? I have no idea.

Mores and morals are as much absolutes as beauty is a truth. That is to say, it's a perpetual and fruitless, in the terms of resolution, debate. Even if there *were* absolutes for each there arises the problem of, you guessed it, intent. To ignore intent is akin to stating a game sucks without being bothered to read it. Of course, to

some folk, certain topics are out-of-bounds regardless of how they are handled.

In my opinion, no one can make any judgment call on anything without taking the time and expending the effort to familiarize themselves with it. That means no skimming reviews, no latching on to hearsay; that means picking up and reading the material.

This means finding out the author's intent, as well. (Am I the only one who hears that record skipping?) Yes, in a perfect world full of perfect authors, intent would be blatantly obvious in the material and comprehension on behalf of the audience would be immediate and without fault, but as long as we reside on this whirling blue and green rock doing some research into the author and the process are integral to fully understanding something. This is the same across all media. This understanding is not necessary for you to enjoy the game or dislike the game, but it is absolutely necessary if you plan on damning or condoning the effort made.

Another problem rears its head after both the intent and the execution have been deciphered and agreed upon: Appropriateness. And here is where the thorns stick out the farthest. The will of the buying public (as mentioned above) is actually pretty supportive of things the vocal moral minority decry. Make of that what you will. As long as dollars are spent, those products will get made, as profitability and sales are the fundament of any good publishing plan.

In the end, the question of morality is one without answer, or rather one with as many answers as witnesses.

**In England, your game's called a 'Hoover'**

So, does your favorite game suck? Of course. It's probably the worst game ever made. I know all my games suck, especially my favorite one. Which is fine by me if it motivates you to create a game that doesn't suck. Good luck on that, though. Trust me, you're going to need it. Ω





# A role-playing game by any other name ...



## Editorial by Eddy Webb

Eddy Webb is the Co-Line Developer for *Cartoon Action Hour* with Spectrum Studios. He is also an active role-playing game industry freelancer. Eddy is currently working on *Midway City*, a retro-cool role-playing game in the future with roots in gangland past.

All right then, so you're not a wet-behind-the-ears gamer. You've played for a while, and you know your way around a dice bag, and which books make better blunt objects to club people with than others (personally, I don't recommend anything produced by Matt Snyder—there's not nearly enough mass in *Dust Devils* to cause a good concussion).

No matter how you got into role-playing games, you've probably read many, many of those tired introductions to our hobby that compare role-playing games to movies, radio plays, TV shows, computer games, books, tactical simulation wargames, comic books, Greek tragedies, Christian passion plays, and Monopoly (although usually not all at once). These passages invariably tell you about a few things that the game is allegedly like, and then they immediately reverse themselves to tell you how it's not like those things at all. You realize that the implication of these introductions is to produce some magical addition and subtraction of common ground that will show the new reader exactly what the enigma of the mysterious "role-playing game" really is. Of course, we all know that none of it made a damn bit of sense until we sat down and played, but still the introductions come.

Let's not beat around the bush, here. A role-playing game is a role-playing game, period. It isn't "like" anything else. Sure, it's fair to say that role-playing games have some things in common with tactical simulations, fiction, and traditional games. But, after 25 years we still feel this need to quantify our games by the things that they're "kind of like" rather than what they really are. Even though the initials *RPG* have come to mean "role-playing game" to a vast majority of people (even if many of them associate it with comput-

ers games), we are still trying to push, pull, fold, spindle, and mutilate our hobby into looking like something it isn't.

These persistent analogies, which appear to be grand unification theories for the *Odyssey*, *Candyland*, and James Bond movies, are so pervasive that they start to color our perceptions of role-playing games as a whole. As we keep thinking that our games are *like* fiction, *like* games, or *like* tactical simulations, we try to push them in those directions in order to make them "better." Entire theories of role-playing game design attempt to cast a game's appeal by how close to fiction, games, or tactical simulations it comes. While role-playing games do have elements of each of these, the parts do not easily extract from the whole.

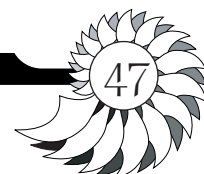
*Role-playing games used to be wargames, but they aren't wargames.* It's safe to say that the emphasis most role-playing games have on kicking the crap out of this week's bad guys stems from tactical simulation roots, but there seems to be a latent terror in admitting that our games

evolved from pushing little metal men around on a table, as if bringing any detail to the rules might cause players to spontaneously start spewing out weapon caliber and penetration information like a reject from a

Vietnam film. Most role-playing games are really fairly poor models of "reality," but since we keep being told that they are "kind of like Risk," this perception has stuck.

*Role-playing games want to be fiction, but they aren't fiction.* Most popular fiction revolves around one or two core characters, even if those characters are the first among equals in a large group of minor characters. Role-playing games tend to focus on a party of characters, each of whom has equal say or chance of participating.

**"After 25 years we still feel this need to quantify our games by the things that they're 'kind of like' rather than what they really are."**





Besides character emphasis, fiction has a predetermined and fairly rigid plot as a necessity, while RPGs are more interactive and fluid, lest the game master be given the scarlet R for Railroaded on his forehead for all future players to see. The very nature of role-playing games makes it self-defeating to try to emulate fiction accurately, but yet we push harder to do exactly that.

*Role-playing games feel like games, but they aren't games.* Calling something a game implies a competitive contest with easily understood goals that determine which competitor has succeeded, thus ending the contest. Role-playing games are traditionally cooperative efforts with very vague goals that are rarely resolved definitively with any one "winner" in mind.

Even the very name we've attributed to our hobby reinforces the belief that these are just games with a few extra bits tacked on, but again that really isn't. Trying to make role-playing games more like a game is an uphill battle—the closer it comes to being a game, the further it goes from being a role-playing game.

As an example of the entrenched identity crisis that the role-playing industry has, take a look at our muddled terminology. The *game* master can take *player characters* on an extended *campaign*. This sentence deftly encompasses all three elements of tactical simulation, game, and fiction in one lump of jargon. As a result, many games have the mistaken belief that reinterpreting our collective lexicon (turning a "campaign" into a "series" or a "chronicle," for example, making it more "literary") somehow purges the game of its undesirable roots. This extends to just about every term we have. Non-player characters can become "Extras," "Set Dressing," or "Antagonists," and game masters gain enough titles to make a nobleman blush. Invariably,

whether you call your randomizers the Hand of Fate or Lady Luck, players will still ask you to pass the dice.

This is where we can stop the tide of muddled thinking. There isn't any harm in using commonly-understood terms, because the original meaning of that term has changed over time. Most of us know that a "campaign" originally meant an extended series of military conflicts, but now it means a connected set of role-playing game adventures to us – it's as connected to the military in our minds as spam email is to canned meat or Monty Python. Instead of explaining to players why they should call you the Great High and Mighty Grand Poobah every time they want to spend their experience points (excuse me, "Improvement Traits"), can we forget the pedigree of the haphazard technical terms we've developed over the years, and just call you the "GM"?

I think it's time we acknowledge that role-playing games are a unique form of entertainment, even art. I'm advocating an appreciation that role-playing games are something special unto themselves, and that they aren't like anything else. What I'm *not* advocating is that we stop innovation in our industry, or that we should become complacent with the state of gaming. While analogies are good for explaining to outsiders what role-playing games are, role-playing games aren't truly analogous to other things. We have to recognize that. When we strive to improve and better our games, whether as creators, game masters, or just players we should do so by improving what role-playing games *are*, not what they *aren't*.

Now I'm off—I have to write the introduction to *Midway City*, and I've just gotten to the part where I compare role-playing games to late 1940s flamenco dancing. Ω







# Guilty pleasures

## The shame of being a role-player

### Editorial by Lisa Clark-Fleishman

Lisa Clark-Fleishman is an avid gamer who has done occasional freelance work for White Wolf Game Studios. Her current work in progress includes *The Lands of Myria*, an independent *Riddle of Steel* supplement.

Gamers are violent, masochistic, socially deviant persons worthy of the general public's fear and loathing.

Not true? College textbooks, designed for future police officers, tell us so. "... fantasy games such as *Dungeons & Dragons* also promote violence, destruction, and a total disregard for human life." (Bennett, Wayne W. *Criminal Investigation*. Minneapolis, MN: West Publishing Company, 1994.)

Critical commentary of role-playing games is not limited to Jack Chick tracts or right-wing religious fanatics. Mainstream media inform us that our children and young adults fall under the evil sway of gaming, leading them down a slippery slope of bizarre and violent behaviors that fall outside of typically accepted social norms. Murderer James Nelson was said to have developed an "obsession with *Dungeons & Dragons* ..." [www.msnbc.com/local/vcolptld/m313318.asp](http://www.msnbc.com/local/vcolptld/m313318.asp)

Would-be murderer Matthew Lovett was declared "an avid player of role-playing video games." [www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,91280,00.html](http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,91280,00.html) The prosecuting attorney in the Michael McDermott murder case asked pointed questions about whether or not two decades of role playing experience made McDermott "a skilled storyteller who could concoct stories." [www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,50081,00.html](http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,50081,00.html) And, of course, who could forget the game-related finger pointing made after the Columbine disaster.

Many more examples of the role-playing hobby's tarnished image exist, and such anecdotes are no longer sequestered in the low quality, mass-produced anti-role-playing game pamphlets of the early 1980s. It takes only a few clicks by a concerned parent on the Internet to turn up horror stories such as these and many more to boot. It's enough to make a well-reasoned adult wonder what the hell their kid is involved in.

It's also enough to drive well-adjusted, normal individuals who participate in the hobby into hiding. At worst, those who do not participate view the gaming hobby with suspicion. At best, its participants are mocked as immature or socially inept; in other words, participants are "geeky" or worse.

### The real image problem

Mention the previous points to most gamers and you'll likely receive a shrug of the shoulders and a brief explanation or defense of how the hobby really is. However, smart, conscientious gaming doesn't make the headlines, even though it exists. School related programs, like this one: [www.roleplay-workshop.com](http://www.roleplay-workshop.com), use role-playing as a teaching method with success. Nevertheless, the mainstream is bombarded with images that create the impression that role-playing games are a negative influence, and role-playing gamers are social derelicts waiting for the first opportunity to ritually sacrifice the neighbor's cat.

Such imagery is so oppressive that numerous individuals in the hobby either downplay or completely hide their involvement to avoid the negative social stigma attached to the hobby. Many gamers are like secret agents; they simply don't discuss their hobby in mixed company. For this reason, it's difficult to get a true representation of what the gaming hobby looks like as a whole. The only widely available survey of this hobby's demographics was released by Wizards of the Coast and can be found here: [www.thegpa.org/wotc\\_demo.shtml](http://www.thegpa.org/wotc_demo.shtml) Upon its release, the survey received criticism based on methodologies used to calculate the final tallies. Some questioned the legitimacy of the survey.

Despite what may or may not be inconsistencies in the Wizard of the Coast survey, some information about gamers, and more specifically their attitudes toward the hobby are clear.





Many game groups are insular, and they don't actively seek membership from those outside of the hobby population. Hobbyists of other genres frequently seek new membership from outside of their circle of influence, but gamers don't enjoy trying to explain their "weird" activities to co-workers, neighbors, or other social acquaintances who they think, perhaps rightly, will label them as strange, or odd. While gamers understand the problems facing the hobby, solutions are fleeting.

There is a definite public relations image challenge facing role-playing games. This is bad news for the game industry and hobbyists alike. Gaming has two faces in the public eye. One is a deviant criminal warning sign. The other, more disturbing because of the larger scope, is the social perception of gamers in a negative light. Both prongs are ugly and equally unnecessary, not to mention costly when one considers the missed opportunities of expanding the target market. So why aren't industry leaders howling for change?

### Little has changed

Charges that the game industry has grown stagnant aren't completely unwarranted. Since inception, the general market strategy and sales techniques of game related products have remained the same. While no significant official studies or surveys have been released to the general public, a quick flip through game products of years gone by compared to today's publications show us that the look, feel, and general appeal of the products themselves have only superficially improved. Ditto for the marketing arms and distribution techniques. Without large scale restructuring of the business philosophy of these entities, positive change, and a shift in mainstream appeal is nearly impossible. In business environments, change equates to risk, and risk is scary.

And so the status quo prevails.

What this means to game enthusiasts is that

they are part of a system that, in its stagnation, inadvertently promotes unhealthy attitudes towards an activity that should be viewed no differently than any other legitimate leisure time hobby. If you think this isn't true, take a look at

**"There is a definite public relations image challenge facing role-playing games. This is bad news for the game industry and hobbyists alike."**

"occult related" suicide articles. Never will you see the media speculate about how little Johnny was obsessed with going to Boy Scouts. Instead, you'll read a tragic tale of how he listened to heavy metal music,

played violent video games, and was involved in weird role-playing stuff. Prior court rulings have held that companies that produce music, video games, and even role-playing games aren't liable for the unfortunate incidents when young people take their own lives.

The public at large doesn't seem to buy the notion that listening to music or playing the X-Box actually drives kids over the edge either. "Some people feel angry a lot of the time. Some situations can make anybody angry. We do not, however, expect that playing violent video games will routinely increase feelings of anger, compared with playing a nonviolent game." [www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp784772.html#c71](http://www.apa.org/journals/psp/psp784772.html#c71)

However, when the topic of role-playing comes up, it's a totally different perception. Why is that? Quite simply because role-playing games have never enjoyed the widespread appeal that other escapism activities have. It's not a question of how marketable the products are, but a question of how they are marketed and to whom.

The initial wave of role-players has matured and grown up. These individuals are well adjusted, professional people who generally contribute to society rather than detract from it. These are also the people who have the most discretionary income. Even though gamers have grown up, the role-playing industry field has not, barring a few exceptions. What little promotion and marketing that is done seems to be geared to the 13-18 year old crowd. This dichotomy puts off older gamers, who now see gaming as a "kid thing."





Not surprisingly, the hobby fails to hold the interest of the older demographic, and those individuals leave the market, taking their dollars and their credibility with them. Because of this, the role-playing game market remains relatively juvenile, instead of maturing into its full potential.

This isn't to say that some attempts haven't been made on a large scale to improve the general appeal of the game industry. Wizards of the Coast and White Wolf Game Studios had a movie and TV show, respectively, to market their brands. Considered mediocre successes at best, neither endeavor bolstered the role-playing hobby. In the case of the D&D movie, some would say that the immature stereotype was further enhanced. [www.cnn.com/2000/SHOWBIZ/Movies/12/07/review.dungeons.dragons/index.html](http://www.cnn.com/2000/SHOWBIZ/Movies/12/07/review.dungeons.dragons/index.html)

### Seeking solutions

So what is the solution?

The act of role-playing itself isn't seen as odd; in fact many organizations in various industries use role-play as a learning tool for employees. [web.ask.com/web?q=role+play+job+training&qsrc=2](http://web.ask.com/web?q=role+play+job+training&qsrc=2)

Attorneys, sales people, social workers, and a myriad of other respectable professions pretend to act out situations that may occur in order to prepare the best responses to any given situation. So, it's not the act itself that's seen with derision. Rather, it's the content, or perceived content that seems to make a difference. It's perfectly acceptable, and in some cases encouraged, for serious professionals to use role-play as a learning tool. If that same professional admits to his colleagues that

he role-plays for fun, it's a whole other ball game.

Other fantasy-based leisure activities such as going to the movies or playing a round or two of paint ball are seen as harmless fun. The difference in the public eye is due in large part to the ineffectual marketing campaigns of role-playing game publishers. Instead of promoting products to parents as something they can do with their kids, the promotional items are geared towards the kids themselves. Rather than create smart, intelligent games designed to capture

mature imagination, companies focus their marketing on the "kewl" factor to draw more sales from the teen crowd, all the while alienating the very people who should be their target market—the older people with money!

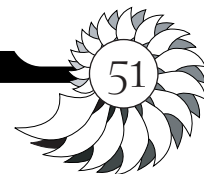
### Change the stereotypes

Until some serious change occurs in the actual marketing philosophy of the industry as whole, the casual gamer will always be bombarded with negative and often incorrect stereotypes. Radical change is necessary for not only the growth, but for the well-being of the hobby itself. Grassroots efforts to change the scope and market of role-playing games can be a positive influence; however it's the industry leaders who must step forward to say enough is enough. Gaming is a legitimate hobby; gaming enthusiasts are no different than the demographic of other hobbyists.

Gamers can support positive change by voting with their dollars.

Until that occurs, it'll be gaming under cover for the majority of the hobby members.

**“Until some serious change occurs in the actual marketing philosophy of the industry as whole, the casual gamer will always be bombarded with negative and often incorrect stereotypes.”**





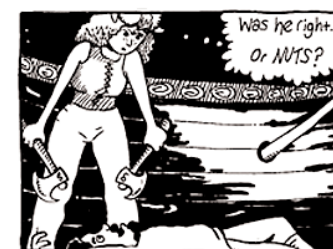
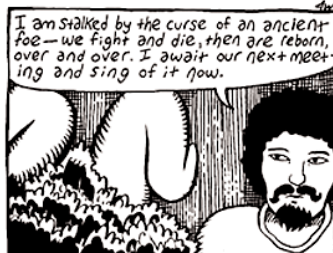
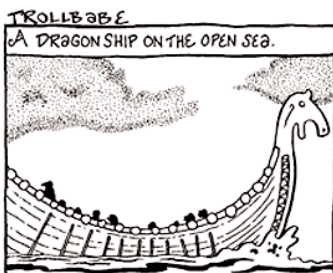


## Trollbabe

"Sex and Death, with Music" is written by Ron Edwards and illustrated by James V. West. This comic is reproduced with permission.

Trollbabe is based on a role-playing game by Ron Edwards. Visit [www.adeptpress.com](http://www.adeptpress.com) for details.

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