PYR⚬MID

FANTASY WORLD-BUILDING

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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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Inspiration for the innovative soul!

IN THIS ISSUE

Zeus never said, "Well, I think I'm done meddling in mortal affairs." Most GMs feel the same way about their fantasy worlds; the desire to add and innovate is strong in such hearty souls. This *Pyramid* is devoted to their efforts at fantasy world-building!

Matt Riggsby melds the historical skill he displayed in **GURPS Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence** with the chaos-loving creativity he forged in **GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 8: Treasure Tables,** delivering *The Turning Points of History.* These tables can help you create vivid histories for the smallest berg or the grandest kingdoms. Learn how today is shaped by the past!

GURPS author Michele Armellini takes you to an empire where news travels fast using *Shadowland Runners.* Find out how they face the perils of another plane (and its odd *GURPS* rules) to accomplish their missions with only their wits.

GURPS Fourth Edition co-architect David L. Pulver explores what happens when *God Is Dead* in the latest installment of *Eidetic Memory.* How does the demise of various gods affect a setting (in systemless and *GURPS* terms), and what can heroes do about it?

Transport the delights of dungeon-delving action above-ground by journeying *In the Jungle.* Learn about the various levels – including hazards and travel options – of a canopy forest in this article suitable for any world with trees.

Though small in stature, underestimating *The Gnomish Mafia* would be a *big* mistake. This systemless article describes key players, motivations, and activities of a "family business."

The *Children of the Coming Darkness* is a new world-breaking cult for **GURPS Banestorm**. Only the desperate or insane would join them – but such souls can be the most dangerous adversaries in the world.

Creating a new calendar for a fantasy setting is a great way to summarize a culture's important events. When those important events have tangible effects on people's lives, things get really interesting, as *The Duodecennial Deviations* demonstrates. What do you do when *everyone* has the same *GURPS* advantage or disadvantage in a year?

Bring out your dead, and help your adventurers get to know *Spirits in Everyday Life.* Find out how folks can influence them and appease them, with *GURPS* guidelines for what happens if they do *and* don't.

This month's *Random Thought Table* challenges the normal world-building rules. *Odd and Ends* offers ideas that couldn't fit elsewhere, including character suggestions for jungle-delvers, plus a *Murphy's Rules* that's just dog-gone funny. It's your world; make your mark on it!

Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

Pale Blue: In This Issue
Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)
Dark Blue: GURPS Features
Purple: Systemless Features
Green: Distinguished Columnists

COVER ART	INTERIOR ART
Ken Kelly	*Greg Hyland*

FROM THE EDITOR

MORE COGS FOR THE WONDERWORKS

Fantasy worlds are voracious pits, demanding constant tribute in the form of fiddly bits and options. This is one of the appeals; most fantasy settings' abilities to absorb, assimilate, and incorporate new material means that they are constantly fresh. A long-running campaign can be reborn time and again, in small ways with the addition of minor bits, or shaken to the foundation with radical, world-altering revelations.

This issue of *Pyramid* tries to give possibilities for all manner of the spectrum. It includes global events and revelations, faraway lands that can be dropped into an otherwise-quiet campaign, and smaller bits that can be added as needed to any existing world. This is one of the more varied issues of *Pyramid* we've done, and we hope there's something for everyone looking to develop their fantastic fiefdoms.
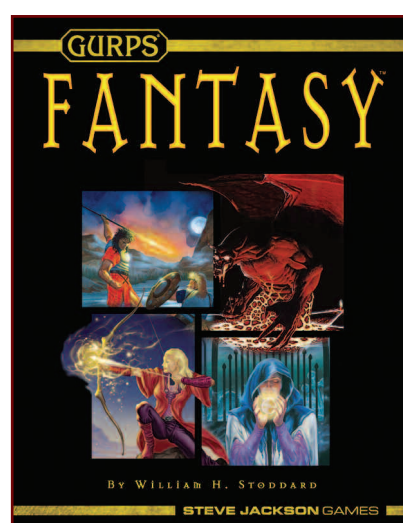
Of course, just about anything related to a fantasy world can be modified as desired. Perhaps the Gnomish Mafia (pp. 21-23) isn't limited to a small geographical area but rather extends globally. Maybe the Duodecennium (pp. 27-31) is a one-time event; if the heroes can survive that decade-plus, their lives will return to "normal." And the history-building insight (pp. 4-8) is designed to be scaled up or down as needed.

Fantasy worlds are some of the most forgiving – and even rewarding – of patchwork constructions. Perhaps that's one of the reasons it's been the most popular genre in roleplaying games since . . . well, as long as there have been roleplaying games!

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Did this issue add to your world in exciting new ways? Were some bits more fantastic than others? Did you find some neat/new/nifty way to use the material herein? You can file your field reports privately at **pyramid@sjgames.com,** or share your research findings with the world (or worlds!) at **forums.sjgames.com.**

THE TURNING POINTS OF HISTORY

BY MATT RIGGSBY

One of the important things about history, like the rest of real life, is that it's messy. The constant appearance of new and different phenomena makes it interesting to read, but sometimes frustrating to design a history from scratch and make it sound convincing. One common mistake is *not* to assume that completely novel factors will arise, and arise frequently. For example, from a high-level narrative point of view, history after the Second World War doesn't make a lot of sense. Most alternate histories play with the consequences of different resolutions to the war, but usually with some subset of the great powers being the *only* significant powers in the aftermath with no new rivals on the horizon. For example, Philip K. Dick's classic *The Man in the High Castle* provides two such alternatives, whittling down the great powers to either Germany vs. Japan or U.S. vs. Britain. But the post-war reality is very different because of the rise of new powers and unexpected transformations of old ones. European rivals have peacefully become an allied power bloc; Russia has subsided as an enemy of the West but remains a separate power; China has resumed the place as a major power it had lost some centuries earlier; and oil-exporting nations have become a power in themselves. If history had an editor, she'd be demanding to know why the French, English, and Germans are getting along all of a sudden and where those wealthy guys in the desert came from.

> *God cannot alter the past, but historians can.*
> *– Samuel Butler*

In a rich, textured history, things change, and often do so without significant advanced warning if you only look at the "major players." It can appear, particularly if viewed through the lens of a scholarly tradition, nationalist narrative, or local legendry, kind of random. Which suggests something involving dice, doesn't it? The tables below provide historical events that can be used as historical turning points for various parts of just about any fantasy setting the GM has created, be it a town, a people, a nation, or an entire continent. The GM can attach these events to an overarching historical narrative, such as the rise of a great power or succession of legendary figures, in order to create a chronology that feels detailed and real. The history can, in turn, provide opportunities in the present for adventures informed by the past.

EVENTS

The first thing to come up with is a list of things that happened. When working up a patch of history, the GM may roll for random items or just pick ones that look appealing. These can then form the important points of a historical narrative. Roll 1d, 1d, 1d.

Politics, War, and Demographics

1-3, 1, 1-2 – Alliance/peace treaty
A lasting accord is reached with a potential or real rival.*

1-3, 1, 3-4 – Assimilation
Some group is gradually absorbed into another – for example, the merger of previously feuding clans, or conquering foreigners slowly adopting the ways of their more numerous conquests and losing their distinct identity.†

1-3, 1, 5-6 – Conquest
The society or location in question takes over or is conquered by a neighbor.*

1-3, 2, 1 – Democratization, major
Political power extends to a much larger group than before – for example, the country becomes a republic, or former serfs are freed from their obligations and given their own property.†

1-3, 2, 2-3 – Democratization, minor
Political power extends to a somewhat larger group than before – for example, the country's noblemen win limited rights (as with the Magna Carta), or a ruler is forced to accept an advisory council with veto power.†

1-3, 2, 4-5 – Fragmentation

A previously united group falls apart into separate entities.†

1-3, 2, 6 – Legislation

A law with significant later repercussions is passed – for example, a law of succession, a significant tax law, or statues outlawing slavery.

1-3, 3, 1-2 – Migration

A new group moves into the area, possibly driven out of their old land by conflict or a declining environment, or encouraged by the promise of riches in their destination. This can but does not have to lead to ethnic conflicts.*

1-3, 3, 3-4 – Political consolidation

Power becomes more concentrated in the hands of an aristocracy or monarchy.

1-3, 3, 5 – Prosperity

The society has a patch of particularly good fortune, leading to increased wealth from bountiful crops, advantageous trade, or whatever other means are appropriate.

1-3, 3, 6 – Raids

Constant low-level conflict, such as Viking raids on northwestern Europe, or the annual Muslim raids on the Byzantine empire.*

1-3, 4, 1-2 – Revolt†

1-3, 4, 3-4 – Rise to power

A notable person, dynasty, or faction rises to a position of rulership, or at least vital political importance.

1-3, 4, 5-6 – Suppression

An existing group or practice is made illegal or put down – for example, prohibiting alcohol, banning literature, or criminalizing a religion.†

1-3, 5, 1-2 – War

A conflict with a neighbor that, whether it ends in victory or defeat, does not provide so complete a resolution as conquest (p. 4) would.*

* May need roll on the *External Actors* table (p. 6).
† May need roll on the *Internal Actors* table (p. 6).

Catastrophe

1-3, 5, 3 – Bad omens

Comets, two-headed calves, etc. They are not necessarily followed by disasters, but may motivate extreme actions to make sure that no disaster follows.

1-3, 5, 4 – Blizzards

1-3, 5, 5-6 – Climate shift

The weather becomes hotter, colder, wetter, or drier for an extended period of time.

1-3, 6, 1 – Diabolical influence

A spate of activity by demons, witches, or other malevolent but not directly destructive supernatural entities.

1-3, 6, 2 – Dragons

1-3, 6, 3-4 – Drought

1-3, 6, 5-6 – Earthquake

4-6, 1, 1-2 – Famine

4-6, 1, 3 – Fire

4-6, 1, 4-5 – Flood

4-6, 1, 6 – Hauntings

4-6, 2, 1 – Heavy weather

Hurricane/typhoon, tornado, or similar devastating natural occurrence.

4-6, 2, 2 – Massacre

A mass killing, which might be motivated by politics, personal or family revenge, religion, or simply madness.

4-6, 2, 3 – Otherworldly breakthrough

For example, invasion by Things From Beyond or the temporary appearance of a faerie castle.

4-6, 2, 4-5 – Plague

> *Truth is stranger than fiction,*
> *but it is because fiction is obliged*
> *to stick to possibilities; truth isn't.*
> *– Mark Twain*

Cultural Touchstone

4-6, 2, 6 – Crime/atrocity

A well-remembered murder, kidnapping, or other crime. Though not necessarily worse than any other crime on close examination, it is taken as an important moment.

4-6, 3, 1 – Death

The death of an important or at least notable person.

4-6, 3, 2-3 – Decadence

Either social or personal decadence – for example, it's a cliché of history that the grandchildren and great-grandchildren of rough-and-ready conquerors become far more interested in religion, scholarship, or luxury.

4-6, 3, 4 – Divine contact

4-6, 3, 5 – Domestic changes

A shift in family size (for example, a change from nuclear families to extended family compounds), gender relations (for example, greater or lesser equality between the sexes, or the appearance or acceptance of a "third gender" or similar arrangements), generational status (for example, the establishment of a gerontocracy or the popular adoption of a "retirement age").

4-6, 3, 6 – Dynastic change

A new significant family, clan, or other group emerges or passes away. Though this may be accompanied by considerable if often short-lived conflict, it can be completely peaceful.

4-6, 4, 1 – Heroism

4-6, 4, 2 – New fashion

4-6, 4, 3-4 – New religion

4-6, 4, 5-6 – Religious revival

New Invention/Development

4-6, 5, 1-2 – Artistic
A statue, poem, painting, or other artistic creation becomes well-known.

4-6, 5, 3 – Magical

4-6, 5, 4-5 – Material
Improved metals, ceramics, glass, etc.

4-6, 5, 6 – Mechanical
The creation of hydraulics, gearing, power sources, etc.

4-6, 6, 1-2 – Military
Superior arms and armor, or simply better organization and tactics.

4-6, 6, 3 – Scientific
Improvements in primarily theoretical fields rather than practical engineering: astronomy, mathematics, physics, etc.

4-6, 6, 4-5 – Subsistence
New or superior crops, better animal husbandry, improved agricultural technology, etc.

4-6, 6, 6 – Transportation
Better ships, new sailing routes, superior roads, improved maps and surveying tools etc.

> *History is an account, mostly false, of events, mostly unimportant, which are brought about by rulers, mostly knaves, and soldiers, mostly fools.*
>
> *– Ambrose Bierce*

Internal Actors

Many times, who did something is as important as what they did. For example, who revolted against their masters? Who was most affected by a natural disaster? In those cases, roll 1d, 1d to determine who within the territory or society in question is most associated with a given event.

1-2, 1 – Clergy, fringe
Religious people on the outskirts of power and orthodoxy, such as street preachers, heretics, and cloistered monastics.

1-2, 2 – Clergy, mainstream
Members of the religious establishment (for example, priests of major temples or national religious leaders) and their hangers-on.

1-2, 3 – Craftsmen

1-2, 4-5 – Ethnic minority
A subset of society with a distinctive heritage, such as gypsies in Medieval Europe, ethnic Chinese merchants and settlers in southeast Asia, or elves or dwarves in a predominantly human society.

1-2, 6 – Gentry, rural
Owners of large quantities of agricultural land.

3-4, 1 – Gentry, urban
City-dwellers who are not craft professionals, merchants, or direct members of the ruling class. This may include a class of bankers, city-dwellers with notable political rights (for example, the right to vote for or confirm members of the ruling class), or aristocrats deriving their wealth from rural holdings but preferring life in the cities or around ruling courts.

3-4, 2 – Magicians

3-4, 3 – Merchants

3-4, 4-5 – Peasants

3-4, 6 – Religious minority
Members of an emerging, dying, or otherwise minority religion: Christians in Muslim nations, Muslims in Christian nations, Set worshipers in Aquilonia, etc.

5-6, 1 – Ruling class
This may be a royal or imperial family and its immediate hangers-on or some similar "professional political" class that provides most of the rulers and upper legislators.

5-6, 2 – Slaves

5-6, 3 – Urban poor

5-6, 4 – Military, rank-and-file

5-6, 5 – Military, officers

5-6, 6 – Intellectuals

External Actors

When necessary (for example, for conquests and alliances), roll 2d to see what kind of external group has had an impact on the history being constructed.

Roll	Result
2–6	Neighboring state
7	Neighboring tribe
8	Migrating tribe
9	Pirates/raiders
10	Refugees
11–12	Semi-autonomous internal group (roll on the *Internal Actors* table, above)

MAKING HISTORY

Once a series of events is generated, the GM treats them as important turning points in the history of the place or society in question. For example, the GM decides to construct a history of the town of Sleepyton. He rolls 5, 1, 5 (flood); 6, 5, 3 (magical invention); 1, 4, 1 (revolt); 3, 1, 6 (conquest); 3, 6, 3 (drought); and 2, 3, 4 (consolidation). The GM decides to flesh out the revolt and conquest with an internal and an external actor respectively, and so rolls accordingly: 3, 3 (merchants) and 8 (migrating tribe). The overall history, then, might go something like this.

Example: The Great Flood of a few generations ago wiped out most of the people and holdings that used to be there back in the forgotten mists of the past. What really got things going again was the invention of a species of extremely productive magic bean. Sleepyton became wealthy from giant-vine exports, but a cabal of increasingly wealthy, powerful merchants felt they were oppressed and overtaxed, so they had a revolt, which ousted the old rulers. Though successful, the new mercantile administration lacked the martial ability of the old aristocrats. Some decades later, the merchants were themselves overthrown by a wandering tribe of barbarians, who set themselves up as rulers. After several years of drought reduced the economic as well as political power of the bean-merchants, concessions they had granted themselves during their years of rule were completely revoked, leaving the barbarian chieftains as sole rulers.

With a redefinition of scope, this same narrative can work for an entire kingdom. A period of extensive flooding wipes away the centers of civilization across the country, magic beans restore the national economy, bean merchants overthrow the old order, and the conquering tribe becomes an entire horde.

Several **GURPS** books provide ways of constructing and interpreting history, which can be used to organize and explain a sequence of events. **GURPS Fantasy** (pp. 79-85) presents a life-cycle metaphor for the history of a place, culture, or state: origins, rise to prominence, decadence and other hazards, eventual collapse, and rebirth. Those stages can form the framework of an overall historical narrative, the details of which may be filled in by selected events. The GM can then pick one or two events to characterize each stage in the cycle until reaching the desired stage of development. For example, in the history of Sleepyton, the Great Flood and subsequent invention of magical giant beans are the origin of the town for the period in question. The rise of Sleepyton is found in the rise of the merchants, with decadence under their rule and a rebirth as part of new empire a consequence of the barbarian conquest.

GURPS Infinite Worlds presents a number of historical approaches that can be used as lenses through which to interpret a series of events and flesh out narratives based on them. For example, a Great Man interpretation of the example history may focus on notable people behind events: the inventor of the magic beans, the individual merchants who led the revolt and established merchant rule, and the barbarian king who wiped them all out. Conversely, an economic,

military, or other broad social approach would explain the same history differently, concerning itself with the market for giant beans, the inevitable rise of bean traders over other aristocrats, and the natural or other social forces behind the barbarian migrations.

In Spaaaaaaaace!

Although some of the entries in these tables are geared very specifically to low-tech fantasy campaigns, it is possible to rework things to apply to a broader range of campaigns.

Among the catastrophes, bad omens is fairly portable, but may need to be interpreted differently. In a more mundane and/or technologically sophisticated society, "omens" may include market panics, concerns about threatening volcanoes or comets, worries about resource shortages, and other fears of impending disasters. In a science-fiction setting, diabolical influence, dragons, hauntings, and otherworldly breakthroughs may find setting-appropriate analogs, such as mind-warping computer viruses, attacks by cosmic monsters, and dangerous visits by incomprehensible but powerful aliens and interdimensional travelers. In purely mundane settings, these may be treated as cultural phenomena (whether or not ghosts actually exist doesn't matter much as long as people *think* they do) or simply rerolled (because it's really hard to fake a dragon).

In cultural touchstones, divine contact need not be widely accepted or even confirmable. Treat it as a religious revival where appropriate.

Under new inventions, magical developments may be substituted with any technology not already covered, such as medical breakthroughs and developments in information technology.

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

History isn't just something to look back at with nostalgia. It informs the present, shaping the landscape and setting up current conflicts. When setting up a campaign, how *then* sets things up for *now* is what's really important.

History and the Landscape

The most visible traces of history are left in the physical landscape. Any event or notable person is likely to get a monument or other physical reference somewhere. Indeed, the wealthy and powerful made a point of having their names attached to palaces, temples, aqueducts, roadways, and other public works. For example, Marcus Agrippa famously built the Pantheon in Rome. But even the less wealthy and powerful tend to leave some traces behind. In medieval Europe, sponsors of churches got their faces inserted into the paintings and statues adorning the walls (as did individual artists), while notable people such as Olympic athletes and victorious generals could have statues of themselves erected in ancient Greece. In the Sleepyton example (above), the seat of government might be the bean-growers guild hall. Fantasy worlds simply make some of the resulting monuments more spectacular: "That tower made of human bone? Yeah, Yaggagak the Necromancer made that out of a bunch of zombies as a gift for his fiancée. Died of smallpox before they could get married."

Great events and great people may also leave behind treasures and legendary artifacts.

Physical traces of the past can be more subtle and less clearly labeled than that. A region that has been subjected to natural disasters, conquests, or sudden shifts in population is a perfect place for ruins. Older buildings will have been abandoned to decay, or violently destroyed. This leads to a landscape filled with semi-hidden traces of old buildings, such as ancient foundations (and hidden cellars!) under more modern buildings, or fragments of ancient statuary and sculptural decoration mixed in with coarse rubble in a farmer's drystone wall. These are also events during which valuables can go missing – something for treasure hunters to go after them.

Particular kinds of disasters and hazards also cause defensive responses. Regions prone to flooding may end up with styles of architecture that place buildings on stilts or pillars; barbarian raids and dragon attacks will encourage fortified stone or brick buildings; and frequent infestations of ghosts may lead to the explosion of a *feng shui* industry and structures designed according to esoteric mystical principles.

Influxes of wealth and the rise of new elites tend to be accompanied by new construction. For general population increases, new settlements can arise, and old ones may become divided into "new city" and "old city" neighborhoods. Fast building may be done according to a plan (for example, an orthogonal street grid, or symmetrical construction around central landmarks), while slower building is likely to be more organic. Palaces and temples constructed by new elites may be separate from those used by the old order, in which case older buildings are likely to decay or be taken over for other purposes. Alternatively, the new elite may extend or replace older buildings, leading to the same kind of vestiges left by more catastrophic changes.

People

Physical traces can sometimes be found in people as well, particularly in a fantasy setting. Intermarriage and magical events may infuse a minority of the population with unusual abilities or persistent curses. For example, a strain of elvish blood might give some of the population latent magical ability, or the cumulative effects of long-term demon worship may result in a population with a tendency toward horns and spontaneous combustion.

New inventions are certainly economically important, but they may be socially restricted as well. (**GURPS Low-Tech** and its companions can be used as sources for mundane invention ideas.) Craft guilds worked very hard, if not always uniformly successfully, to retain a monopoly on their most notable products. Many inventions can remain the exclusive province of a small group of local producers, which provides an opportunity for industrial espionage.

More subtle still, but also more important, are the traces of history left in society. Some social traces may be quite minor, expressed in festivals, clothing, foodways, and other minor aspects of everyday life. In the Sleepyton example (p. 7), the barbarian rulers may have been thoroughly assimilated into the local society, but certain traditional meat dishes may appear on ceremonial menus (for the opening of council sessions, weddings, etc.) in place of the region's generally bean-based cuisine, or a festival may divide the town into "barbarian" and "townsman" factions (by family, neighborhood, or completely arbitrarily) for races, jousting, competitive dance performances, and other amusements. Participants in ancient conflicts can easily become stock characters in plays, poems, and songs.

Social divisions created by historical conflicts may be very much present and important. Migrations, dynastic changes, and revolutions create winners and losers whose positions are often inherited for generations. Thus, a series of historical changes is likely to lead to a patchwork of privileges, obligations, and restrictions unevenly applied across social groups. Even events that, at a high level, democratize a society are unlikely to consolidate disparate groups. Rather, they create new privileges for previously subordinate groups or take them away from others while maintaining old divisions and possibly creating new ones. For example, a semi-successful peasant revolt might lead to peasant representation in aristocratic councils, but only by peasants from a certain region or belonging to certain families. In the Sleepyton example, the new overlords' consolidation of power might restrict old merchants' rights to a small handful of them or even collect power that had once been shared by a number of chieftains into the hands of a single high chief.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Matt Riggsby was born in one corner of the country, then went to two different coasts for education and ended up in a career completely different from what he studied for. What he also didn't see coming are his consistently lovely and talented spouse, mercurial son, and a pack of dogs who, being incapable of remembering the past, are condemned to repeat it.

*You're assuming that Nero knows how events are predicted to unfold. The contrary, Nero's very presence has altered the flow of history, beginning with the attack on the **U.S.S. Kelvin,** culminating in the events of today, thereby creating an entire new chain of incidents that cannot be anticipated by either party.*

*– Spock, in **Star Trek***

SHADOWLAND RUNNERS

WHERE NEWS TRAVELS FAST

BY MICHELE ARMELLINI

Travelers from all over the world tell fantastic tales about the faraway Empire of Thebor, beyond the Great Ocean. It rules the whole Theboran continent, a huge land mass crisscrossed by natural obstacles such as tall mountain ranges and immense forests. Anywhere else in the world, such a place would be the home of a hundred warring kingdoms. If a determined conqueror unified the continent, then he'd be forced to appoint governors. Such subrulers would be powerful simply because of the distance from the capital; an order by the emperor might take weeks to reach all provinces . . . and the governors would soon fancy themselves kings. In contrast, if an earthquake hits the farthest of the Theboran provinces, the Theboran emperor knows about it on the following day.

Last month, the loss of an entire flotilla of spice-laden ships in the distant Pirate Reaches ruined one of the richest merchant houses of Katheede, the Theboran capital. Its competitors got wind of it in three days. Were that to happen elsewhere in the world, news would have taken three weeks to travel comparable distances!

THE SECRET OF THE SHADOWLAND

The Theboran secret is an alternate plane of existence. Theboran wizards named it the Knowledge Plane, because it gives insights into the workings of nature on the so-called Material Plane. It is best known as the Shadowland, the name laypeople use; though nowadays, the Theboran mages who routinely go there call it "the Elsescape" in their jargon. Magically apt Theborans often visit that plane, and generally not because they are looking for deeper knowledge.

Fast Forward

Theoreticians believe the Knowledge Plane is the blueprint of reality. This has several consequences, but the one the Theborans exploit the most is that, as they say, it is easier to move one's eyes from one corner of a blueprint to another than walking around a real building.

Visitors claim that, in the Shadowland, there is less friction than on the Material Plane; they say everything seems less dense. Whatever the reason, a mage walking in the Elsescape is twice as fast as a man walking on real ground, everything else being equal. This applies to any physical feat and all forms of movement.

Additionally, most of this plane is permeated by exceptionally strong magical energy. Spells are easy: Casters have +5 to their skill, which also reduces the energy cost (see p. B236).

The net effect is that a messenger on foot, with no other magical help than that needed to enter the Knowledge Plane and to remain there for as long as needed, could cover 80 miles per day on average terrain. If he casts Quick March (**GURPS Magic,** p. 144), that doubles to 160 miles per day! With Levitation (**GURPS Magic,** p. 143), rivers or other impassable terrain are simply flown over. Thus, the current main use of the Shadowland for the Theborans is to convey information to distant parts of the Material Plane.

Visit Majestic Thebor!

Even if the GM has a fantasy world going, adding a new continent is often possible; TL3 Europeans didn't know about Australia. There are several options to add Thebor to an existing campaign. There is always the possibility of first contact (see the adventure ideas on p. 13 for more ideas). Alternatively, an already-existing huge empire might be usable. A final option is "history in the making": the Shadowland is a recent discovery in the campaign, and existing kingdoms, merchants, and wizards' guilds are adapting.

Entering

Theboran mages don't enter the Shadowland in person, but instead send projections of themselves, which they call "shadow bodies." This is done by means of the Planar Visit spell (**GURPS Magic,** p. 82). Mages who plan to stay away for more than a few hours use a magical item enchanted with that spell *and* with 2 points of Power (see p. B480). In this way, they can remain in the Shadowland as long as they want, and their shadow body can even sleep there.

The shadow body – a perfect likeness of the real one – appears in the Shadowland in a place analogous to where the caster's real body now lies, nearly comatose, on the Material Plane. The magical assisting item remains on the physical body.

Where No Man Has Ever Gone

"Naturalist" Theboran wizards (p. 12) call the Shadowland "Nature's Will." These scholars maintain that the existence of humankind is an accident – a mistake by some minor god. They say that's evident from the first impression a visitor gets. If he has cast the spell in the midst of a city, he will find himself in a forest. The Knowledge Plane may be the blueprint of reality, but it's a reality where people weren't around to build things. Navigation in the Shadowland must rely on natural landmarks, because roads aren't there.

A vital – and potentially lethal – corollary of this is that a mage should not cast the spell while in a cellar or similar underground chamber. The room is artificial, and has no counterpart in the Knowledge Plane; the shadow body will be buried. On the Astral Plane that wizards from other continents know, planar visitors can't touch anything and can move through mountainsides; the earth of the Shadowland will be very real to the shadow body of the hapless mage from the cellar.

> *The objects and inhabitants of the astral plane are real in exactly the same way as our own bodies, our furniture, our houses or monuments are real.*
> *– Charles W. Leadbeater*

Seeing the Sights

When a mage arrives to this alternate plane for the first time, he will immediately understand the reasons behind its nickname. The place is steeped in twilight, which is perennial, as if the planet stood still just before sunrise. Vision rolls are at -2 or worse, and mists are common. The season seems frozen to spring. The weather also appears largely stalled; flying over the Thagan Estuary likely reveals a storm – every time.

Weather can be no small problem, because clothes are made by humans. On the Astral Plane, the wizard might be clothed in an astral echo of his robe. In the Shadowland, the visitor wakes up naked and with no equipment whatsoever. And shadow bodies *do* feel the Shadowland's wind chill.

Surviving

Because of all the above, Theboran mages who make a living in the Shadowland are good survivalists. Someone who wakes up with no weapons or food can still use his hands, wood, and vegetal fiber to create a club and a trap. While the

Shadowland doesn't contain anything that humans made *on the Material Plane*, human shadows who are in the Shadowland can build things, and they will be real, on that plane, just like the wood, stone, or pelts they are made of.

Therefore, the key to a successful mission is preparation. Professionals routinely visit the Shadowland area around the place where they live on the Material Plane, and build themselves a "stash." This is a well-hidden cache containing provisions, warm clothing, tools and weapons. Food has to be protected against scavengers, of course; and rival mages, or simply unscrupulous ones, could steal from another's stashes.

Most of this equipment is TL0 or TL1 (Thebor itself is TL3-4), because it's difficult to do more, starting from scratch. However, in theory – given plenty of time, resources, and mages skilled in other fields of expertise – it might be possible to establish copper and tin mining in the Shadowland, and eventually to come up with shadow-metal blades . . .

Shadowland Hazards

Just like the shadow body can feel the hailstones, the same goes for all other threats. Fires, landslides, predators – if it can harm your real body on the Material Plane, it won't be good for your shadow body in the Shadowland. Just like time and weather, these events also seem somehow locked in place in the Shadowland. Mount Helegh, a dormant volcano on the Material Plane, has rarely been seen without a volcanic eruption going on in the Shadowland, and gryphon attacks are common in certain notorious areas.

However, even though physical harm suffered in the Shadowland is very real to shadow bodies, it doesn't carry over when the person comes back. If he broke a leg, he'll be in pain and a cripple for as long as his visit lasts, but his real body's leg will be sound once he emerge.

Psychological harm and anything affecting the mind are different. Somebody put under a geas while in the Shadowland isn't released from it when he returns to the physical world. Permanent mental disadvantages acquired there don't go away. Psychosomatic effects also carry over to the real body; if a failed Fright Check causes somebody's hair to turn white overnight, that applies to both bodies.

Because of the mental effects of physical damage, a mage who was hurt in the Shadowland must make a HT roll when waking up. His wound is no more, but if he fails that roll, he will still feel the pain for 2d hours. If a limb was crippled or maimed, a failure on that roll means the real limb will be functionally useless for 2d days. The appropriate healing spells will neutralize this.

Getting Back

At the normal end of a foray in the Shadowland, the mage has his shadow body go back to where he entered the plane. He then wills the magical assisting item to deactivate, or he stops maintaining the initial spell. The shadow body seems to fall asleep, and the mage wakes up in his real body. When this happens, an observer who remained in the Shadowland will see that the shadow body disappears. People don't exist in the Shadowland, unless they have come there from the Material Plane – at least, as far as the Theboran mages know.

The traveler's real body will be none the worse if the trip has lasted under 12 hours. However, if the mind stays away for longer, the body won't be able to drink and eat, and the rules for dehydration and starvation kick in (see p. B426).

Thus, careful wizards are never lone mavericks; they have apprentices who look after their real bodies, casting healing spells when needed.

The mindless body may need help under other respects, too. As long as the wizard is a shadow body in the Shadowland, his real body can't do anything, and the mage won't be aware of any dangers to it. Powerful mages usually also employ guards!

This arrangement can't go on forever. After two weeks of "absence," the mindless body's functions begin to fall apart; average magic and TL3-4 medicine can't prevent it. Unless powerful magic, or medical treatment from a higher TL, is available, a roll against HT will be needed for the third week, and every week after that, with cumulative -1 penalties. Failure means the body enters a coma (see p. B429). A success with no margin means a temporary loss of 1 point of ST, as unused muscles thin down. This can be recovered in 4d days, once the mage's mind is back, by exercising two hours per day.

Whoever takes care of the real body also has to make sure the magical item that allows the planar visit remains on it; removing it would break the spell.

What Else Could Go Wrong?

If the spell ends or is broken while the shadow body is in a Shadowland location that doesn't correspond to the immediate vicinity of the place in the Material Plane where the real body lies, the mage must roll against HT, applying the long-distance modifiers (see p. B241) to stay alive! If successful, he re-enters his material body. The GM might rule he suffers from an extreme inability to act for himself for a few minutes (see *Incapacitating Conditions*, p. B428).

This procedure is not necessary if the spell is not broken, but the physical body of the caster is harmed (this is different from what happens on the Astral Plane – see **GURPS Magic**, p. 82). However, if that body is *killed*, the roll must be made. Failure means death; a success means the hapless mage is now a permanent denizen of the Shadowland (see *Savage Shadows*, p. 12).

Employers

The main users of the Shadowland as Thebor's "information highway" are Imperial administrative bodies and wealthy merchant houses. They are the only ones who can afford the costly enchanted items used, and the infrastructure.

Typically, these agencies have networks, built around "hubs" in the main cities. The mages working for them forward the information in relays. This shortens the time each mage has to spend in the Shadowland.

Imperial Messenger Service

This is the oldest state agency. It defers directly to the Imperial Home Ministry. It has hubs everywhere; there is a long-standing, strong mystique of the Service, summed up by the saying "the message will get through." Its wizards are called the Messengers. Its main task is to serve the empire, but it will also carry private "mail" for outrageous fees. However, lately the Imperial Messengers' policies are seen as outdated, their deliveries seem slow, and they are said to suffer a high rate of mishaps.

Imperial Information Gatherers

This is the empire's intelligence agency; its chief is a member of the Privy Council. A few decades ago, in a much-discussed move, they established their own "secure" network of Shadowland Runners (p. 12). Their presence is not as pervasive and their traffic not as intense as the Messengers', but the Spies (as they are bluntly called) are powerful and well-trained. They usually have cover stories.

An Edge Over What, Exactly?

The speed of Shadowlands communication is impressive . . . except when compared to certain Communication and Empathy spells. In particular, any spells which allow information to be sent using long-distance modifiers (e.g., Dream Sending, Message, Mind-Sending, or Telepathy) will vastly outpace a Runner. A simple fix is to use standard range penalties for such spells instead of long-distance modifiers; this preserves their utility for communication across a city, but not across a continent. To compensate for this change, reduce Cost by 1 (minimum 1). Similarly, advantages such as Telesend can be shifted from long-distance modifiers to standard range penalties with the limitation Short-Range 1 (-10%).

Imperial Army

Recently, the army has begun experimenting with liaison officers that make communications independent from the Imperial Service. This applies both to correspondence among main garrisons and headquarters, and to tactical communications among main units and outposts or scouts. It seems that some of the emperor's advisers dislike the fact that provincial generals may talk to each other without making use of the civilian service.

Merchant Guild's Couriers

While a cutthroat competition exists among Theboran trading houses on the Material Plane, they join forces when dealing with nonmerchants, and for offering this service to guild members. Membership fees include a number of free "runs" per year. The Couriers have hubs nearly everywhere, and they are fast. They don't work for nonmembers. Unfortunately, they are rumored to be rife with corruption; rival houses apparently spy on each other by bribing Couriers.

Thorlak Family

This is the largest merchant house. Although it's a guild member, it employs its own Runners (p. 12) to make its correspondence secure and quickly delivered. It's a huge investment, even if Thorlak hubs are present only in a few cities, but it's paying out. Other companies have followed suit.

White Star Enterprise

Is the existence of an organization with a familiar name (see p. B539) just a coincidence? Or is this actually a local branch of the main interworld trading company? In Thebor, this enterprise has stores only in a few main cities, but they are linked the usual way: the Shadowland.

Spice Cartel

Four of the largest house specializing in the most sought-after goods have a cartel agreement and are quashing the remaining competition. They have Shadowland hubs in the capital and in the producing regions. They are also aggressively recruiting wizards to expand their network, anywhere they can find them.

Thieves' Guild

There is circumstantial evidence that this loose federation of criminal families is using the Shadowland.

Typical Jobs

These are some of the ways in which a Theboran mage may be employed in the Shadowland.

Residents

Each service in each hub has at least one junior mage on shift duty in the Shadowland. This is because travelers from other hubs have no means whatsoever of delivering any news they carry directly into the Material Plane! However, they can relay it to the so-called Resident. He then wills his spell to end and reports the message.

Residents also serve other functions. They guard the stashes of their employer's Runners. They work as Shadowland craftsmen, preparing flint arrowheads, treating pelts, smoking meat. Since most hubs have several Residents working for different, competing employers, they also keep an eye on the other traffic. If a young, bored mage who's out there knapping a stone mace sees every other resident of the hub welcoming a harried messenger, that alone is news to report.

Settlers

Some of the bigger hubs see so much of this kind of local activity that their Residents may be referred to as "Settlers." Especially in hostile environments, just having a stash of provisions on a tree and a warden sitting under it isn't enough; some groups have begun building shadow huts and palisades. However, since the competitors' snoopers can, by definition, make use of magic, this results in TL0-1 primitive settlements defended both by thorn bushes and protection spells such as Scryguard!

Settlements, of course, are making the Shadowland less pristine – which is anathema to "Naturalist" mages (see below).

Runners

When Theboran children having magical aptitude dream of a Shadowland career, they image themselves as the "Runners": the mages that actually travel from their entry point to a hub, be it near or very far, to meet the Resident and deliver their message. This is the job that actually turns the Shadowland into the Theboran information highway.

These operators know well the lay of the Shadowland, dangerous areas and good fishing spots alike. They also know their route like the back of their hand. These mages often have high Magery levels, but they are young and not all-powerful. True High Mages in Thebor tend to have worked as Runners in their youth, but later they leave that challenging (and hazardous) endeavor to younger colleagues.

The trading houses often offer memory training, be it magical or mundane. After all, the only memory-storage systems that can be moved from one plane to the other are the mages' minds.

As mentioned, the Runners need to be tough survivalist and clever TL0 craftsmen; many are also skilled with their primitive weapons, and with unarmed combat. When facing a hostile wizard of equal strength and skill, it is not unusual that after two or three spells, the two opponents are winded and magically stalemated; a sharpened bamboo spear may then be the solution.

Brigands

Some of the organizations that operate in the Shadowland don't just send out messengers; they also interfere with other groups' Runners. Sometimes it is more profitable to *stop* information than to forward it.

Mages who specialize in this nasty work are called "Brigands," and they typically make use of ambushes. They know effective combat spells, are good with the bow, and have the skills that would be useful to a TL0 hunter.

> *All of creation is in this plane but in its uncontaminated state, pure as the moment it was divinely conceived.*
>
> *– John Van Auken*

THE ODDBALLS

These aren't the ordinary Theboran players.

Savage Shadows

Accidents with the spell keeping a wizard in the Shadowland might result in trapping him there forever. The Theboran mages' lore is rife with horror stories about these "savage shadows." Often, they are as crazy as a shipwreck victim who spent years alone. Understandably, they usually see visitors as prey. Of course, if they are killed in the Shadowland, they have no way out now.

Naturalists

Also known as Nature's Defenders, these mages' philosophy is that the Knowledge Plane should be visited only to gain knowledge and be otherwise left alone. Settlements are sacrilegious. Some make a point of staying naked when in the Shadowland, and not using anything. They have been protesting against the exploitation of the Elsescape, but to little avail; some advocate direct action.

Spirits?

These are probably just jokes, or hallucinations of exhausted travelers. However, some say there are inhuman beings that live in the Shadowland, trying not to be seen by intruders. Rumor has it that they sometimes help Runners in danger – or play cruel tricks.

Things from Elsewhere

It's possible that the Material Plane isn't accessible from other planes, but that the Shadowland is. If that is true, anything that is barred from reality might appear out there – visitors from other planes, technological or psi-powered world-hoppers, ascended wizards, trans-dimensional gods, or demons.

KNOWLEDGE

What the Naturalists are interested in is still there. This way of using the place is now just a footnote, though. Spending some time in the Shadowland and contemplating something that's indigenous to the place can help someone gain insight about a similar concept in the Material Plane, through a Will roll. Meditation, and other forms of focusing one's attention will give bonuses to this roll; the same applies to spending a long time (as in, more than two hours) in contemplation. This requires concentration.

If the Will roll is successful, it will be worth +1 to +2 to a subsequent roll against a relevant skill, not to do anything, but to learn or understand something. Of course, plenty of interesting things – such as humans, weapons, and castles – aren't indigenous to the Knowledge Plane. However, someone who wants to know whether certain berries can be eaten (roll against Survival), or any *one* piece of information having to do with applicable skills (Geology, Meteorology, Naturalist, Tracking, etc.) may try this.

> *The beyond withered behind him*
> *as he surged along the tear through the*
> *barrier between planes of existence.*
>
> *– Peter Hamilton*

ADVENTURE SEEDS

Thebor and the Shadowland are ripe for adventuring possibilities. Here are a few ideas to make use of this setting.

Foreign Adventurers

At least in the beginning, most adventures involving the discovery of Thebor will involve determining the nature of the Shadowland and its properties.

On Theboran Shores

The heroes might be explorers, traders or survivors – from the other side of the world. They arrive in a Theboran seaport, and if they stay long enough, they'll hear tales about a weird place. They might want to learn more. And there may be those who don't want them to.

The Theboran Embassy

The Theborans have showed up in the kingdom where the PCs dwell, and opened an embassy. Negotiations about trade agreements are going on, but the Theborans seem to know way too much and way too quickly. The heroes are tasked to discover how.

Colonizing the Elsescape Elsewhere

The Theborans are opening up trading posts in the main cities of the kingdom where the PCs live, and plenty of their personnel are wizards. Is it wise to do business with them? How is that they are acquiring sizable market shares? The heroes may be noblemen, merchants, mages, or a troubleshooting team working for them.

World-Hopping and Banestorms

In a *GURPS Infinite Worlds* or *GURPS Banestorm* campaign, the adventurers arrive on this planet for the first time, either intentionally or by mistake. However, they don't land in the Material Plane! They have just entered the Shadowland . . .

Theboran Adventurers

Thebor and its odd communication system have plenty of native adventuring possibilities.

Training Trip

Some Runner (p. 12) trainees enter the Shadowland together to deliver a routine message as a group exercise. They are followed by their trainer, who soon falls victim to an accident (or is it foul play?). The heroes must decide to either run home or carry on with their mission. How important is the message, really?

First Week on the Job

The adventurers work in the same hub, as lowly Residents (p. 12), but they have different employers. The first few days are boring and uneventful, apart from rivalry between the heroes. Nonetheless, it gives them time to get accustomed to the Shadowland. Then something goes terribly wrong, such as an attack by Brigands (p. 12) . . . or worse.

The Dangerous Run

Runners (p. 12) have stopped coming back from one specific bottleneck route! The adventurers are dispatched there as troubleshooters. Is it a natural disaster, an attempt by someone to establish monopoly, supernatural disruption, or a move by angry Naturalists? Or is it a combination of some or all of these?

Shadowland Spies

The heroes work for the intelligence service and are spying on the military network! One of them has infiltrated it, and the rest of the group must keep contact and gather intel. Who knows if they are all playing on the same side? What are the generals *really* up to?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Armellini lives in Udine, Italy, with his very understanding wife, Silvia. He's never been on another plane, and he would probably be too afraid to try. He makes a living out of foreign languages, but he loves dabbling with and studying the obscure and the uncanny – and trying to convert them into game mechanics! Apart from things he has published in Italian, he has written for *Pyramid*, and he is the author of ***GURPS WWII: Grim Legions.*** He is also the author or coauthor (with Hans-Christian Vortisch) of several other e23 products: ***GURPS WWII: Their Finest Hour, GURPS WWII: Doomed White Eagle,*** and ***GURPS WWII: Michael's Army.***

Eidetic Memory

God Is Dead

by David L. Pulver

In some fantasy worlds a god is by definition an immortal and eternal power. In other settings, it is possible for the gods themselves to die. This could be an integral part of an apocalypse that signals the end of time and the destruction of the world . . . but it doesn't have to be. A world's cosmology can be flexible enough to withstand the death of one or more of its deities! The resulting changes can provide opportunities to shake up an existing fantasy campaign and offer exciting possibilities for high-powered adventuring.

How Does a God Die?

It is conceivable that gods may be murdered or destroyed by anyone or anything of comparable power. Such a killer

> *God is dead. God remains dead. And we have killed him. How shall we comfort ourselves, the murderers of all murderers? What was holiest and mightiest of all that the world has yet owned has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood off us? What water is there for us to clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what sacred games shall we have to invent? Is not the greatness of this deed too great for us? Must we ourselves not become gods simply to appear worthy of it?*
>
> *– Freidrich Nietzsche*

could be another god, a demi-god, a powerful demon, or a monstrous spawn of the divine like the Fenris Wolf of Norse myth or the Greek monster Brontes (see ***GURPS Fantasy,*** p. 55). A sufficiently large group of less powerful entities might also overcome a god, such as a huge cabal of wizards or a legion of dragons, demons, or giants. Mortals may discover a magical weapon that can enable a sufficiently skilled wielder to wound or destroy a god, such as the sword Stormbringer in Michael Moorcock's *Elric* novel series. Some gods may be invulnerable to most threats, but have secret vulnerabilities, such as the Norse god Baldur's susceptibility to mistletoe. If the god's secret weakness were discovered, perhaps even a mortal could slay them.

Gods might also be destroyed by the emergence or awakening of another power outside their experience, such as a force of chaos or the actions of a malevolent primordial or outsider entity like Tiamat **(*GURPS Fantasy,*** p. 56) or one of H.P. Lovecraft's elder gods. This force could have been accidentally or deliberately summoned by rival deities or mortals.

Gods are sometimes powered by the prayers, sacrifices, or simple belief of their worshippers (see ***GURPS Fantasy***, p. 33 for one possible game mechanic). If the number or fervor of worshippers falls below a certain critical threshold, the god may die, become mortal, or be weakened enough to fall victim to another fate. A deity might lose worshippers because they have been converted to another faith or no longer believe. Or he may have been worshipped only by a specific group that have themselves suffered some gradual or catastrophic attrition due to war, plague, repression, or other disaster. Similarly, certain gods may also be nourished only by a specific type of worship, whether it is certain temples, a particular line of priests, or specific forms of devotion. If an evil deity requires regular human sacrifices, successfully interrupting or outlawing this practice could eventually weaken or destroy the entity.

Failure of the Natural Order

Besides the destruction of the god itself and the frustration of whatever designs that deity was engaged in, what then?

Being a god is the quality of being able to be yourself to such an extent that your passions correspond with the forces of the universe, so that those who look upon you know this without hearing your name spoken . . . one is wind or fire, the sea, the mountains, rain, the sun or the stars, the flight of an arrow, the end of a day, the clasp of love . . . those who look upon gods then say, without even knowing their names, "He is Fire. She is Dance. He is Destruction. She is Love."

– Roger Zelazny, **Lord of Light**

Some gods may be nothing more than exceeding powerful and long-lived entities, but the concept of "god" usually implies more than just power. It typically indicates that the being in question embodies a natural or cosmological principle within the fantasy world. If the deity is destroyed, and not immediately supplanted by a rival god, it is possible that the natural principles that god or goddess embodies will also start to break down, resulting in dramatic effects on the world. It is these effects that can make the death of a god a fascinating opportunity for a campaign.

In a monotheistic or dualistic cosmology, the death of a god is usually a harbinger or result of an apocalypse. This is true in some pantheistic settings as well, such as North mythology, but it does not have to be the case. Rather than have the entire world fall apart, which would put a crimp on the activities of the adventurers, the dying or passing of a deity could result in a more gradual but still dramatic disruption of the normal course of reality. Assume that nature itself has a certain resilience: This gives mortal adventurers time to notice the situation, live through its effects, and perhaps deal with it.

What might happen? That depend on the nature of the deceased god. There are an infinite number of possibilities depending on what the god represents. Any one can provide an interesting magical alternative to a more natural disaster. If the god's passing occurred in distant location or other dimension, it's possible the death of a god would not even be immediately noticed by mortals. Clerics or priests of the god may be the first to know, as they suddenly cease to receive answers to prayers. But gradually, the effects of the god's death may ripple through the world. Here are a few examples.

Storm God

A storm deity is usually associated with rain, weather, lightning, wind, and thunder. Initial warning signs might be a mitigation of bad weather, resulting in cloudless blue skies, lack of snow, or fierce summer storms failing to appear as predicted. But this could soon worsen. A weakening of winds will trap sailing ships becalmed in port. A gradual slacking off of rainfall will soon turn into drought, famine, and misery. If the deity cannot be revived or replaced, the world may slowly turn to desert.

Sun God

The passing of a solar deity could result in the interruption of the normal day-night cycle. If no one's there to drive the chariot of the sun, then the sun will not rise, and darkness and cold will gradually prevail across the land. This could be a sudden plunge into endless night and freezing winter. A more subtle approach is a slow process that lasts weeks, months, or even years as the sun turns colder and dimmer, its light growing orange and then red before dwindling and fading entirely.

A sun god is sometimes also a fire god. If so, the death of the god could mean that fires themselves could become harder to light or easier to extinguish, and fire magic could gradually weaken.

Life God

A life god is often a fertility god, mother goddess, healing god, god of the harvest, or god of the primal earth. A gradual effect of a life god's dying or death would be a diminishment of fertility and birth. It becomes harder and harder for living things to reproduce. Crops are stunted. More and more animals and humans are stillborn. Wounds might heal more slowly. An alternative is that without a god of life to regulate and control things, life begins to reproduce in weird and unnatural ways, disrupting the entire ecology. Perhaps out of control plagues or bizarre and monstrous mutations of plants or animals appear, or creatures become capable of interbreeding outside their species. (Prior deaths of life gods could explain the existence of hybrid entities like minotaurs or griffins.)

Death God

A death god might be a psychopomp who guides souls, a destroyer of life, or a master of the underworld. As the effects of the death of death are felt by the world, it might initially seem positive. Perhaps every living thing would start accumulative a few levels of Hard to Kill advantage. But the loss of death could soon have nasty or even horrific effects. Without a death god to escort souls to an afterlife, there could be a rise in spontaneous creation of ghosts and other undead. Bodies could start reanimating as zombies unless completely destroyed.

Death gods are often portrayed as bringing an end to suffering. Worse, beings who would die due to a failed HT roll may still be incapacitated and, if conscious, in agony, until their bodies are totally destroyed.

Earth God

If the god's power extends to things that grow in the earth the effect may be the same as the death of a life god, but limited to the gradual failure of seeds to germinate, with the resulting failure of harvests and nature's bounty. This could start out with cumulative penalties to Farming and Gardening rolls, and gradually worsen into total ecological disaster. Some earth gods may regulate tectonic forces. If the god dies, these could cease, but for more drama, they could become out of control, with a steady increase in the number of earthquakes and volcanic eruptions over time. Creatures who live underground could invade the surface world.

Sea God

A simple effect of the death of an oceanic deity could be the same as the loss of a god of life, but limited to sea creatures. Fishermen might first notice a slow decline in their catches. Coastal dwellers find dead fish washing ashore. More dramatically, sea levels might start to slowly drop, perhaps starting with inland seas drying up or turning into salt flats. The deep oceans could begin to drain, perhaps with the manifestation of vast whirlpools that suck the water from one world into a primal elemental plane of water. An even stranger effect of the death of a sea god could be the mutation of some of sea life into land creatures, with fish sprouting legs and crawling ashore to seize control of the land. (A dramatic visual interpretation of this type of unnatural invasion can be seen in the Japanese horror manga and anime *Gyo.*)

Gods of Abstract Principles

The effects of the death of a god governing more abstract principles that govern mortal behavior can be trickier to handle. What happens to the world if a god of love, war, or even poetry is dying or dead?

Such a god may be associated with the practice of particular skills. For example, a god of war might be linked to or have invented skills like Tactics and Strategy; a hunting god, skills like Tracking and Survival; or a love god, skills such as Erotic Art and Sex Appeal. The death of such a god could impose penalties on all skills that normally fall within the god's sphere. It's a good idea to limit this to mostly a few key IQ-based skills, rather than thinking of every possible activity that might fall under a god's influence. Thus, if a god is known to have created or be the patron of a particular weapon, penalizing that weapon skill makes sense, but it is overkill to penalize every single weapon skill because a hunting god or war god has died! Rather than just assigning a blanket penalty to skill, a more subtle way is to increase the chance of critical failure when using it. This could start out at 16+ and gradually worsen as the god dies or the effects of its death spread through creation, perhaps culminating in a 15+ or 14+. That way the death of a god will affect everyone connected with the sphere, rather than just the least skilled characters.

Magic and Powers

If someone explicitly derives particular powers or clerical magic from a god, the god's death can result in those powers or spells no longer working. This usually applies if the person is a cleric or other servant of the god whose powers depend expressly on the god's will, e.g., through Power Investiture.

What if the adventurer has spells or powers that fall under the general sphere of a dead god, are connected to it in some way, but aren't specifically granted by the god? Things can get interesting.

First, the GM could gradually increase the difficulty of spells associated with the god's particular sphere of interest, e.g., the death of a storm god makes it harder to do Air spells. This could be simply handled by treating the godless world as a low mana area for the purposes of that particular college of magic.

However, it's also possible that the god's power actually served to *control* rather than generate that form of magical. With the god gone, the brakes could be off. For instance, if the death of a death god is now causing a breakdown in the walls being life and death, then Necromancy might actually be *easier* as a result! This could produce a subtle effect like a small bonus or general -1 in the energy cost of all Necromancy spells, or a dramatic effect like a global increase in the mana level when using such magic. There may also be a price, like an increased chance of critical failures (e.g., on a 16+). If this is the outcome of the god's death, it could also be a possible motive for the god's murder, e.g., a cabal of necromancers or demons who sought to liberate the power for themselves.

Similar effects could apply to those with advantages bought as powers (see **GURPS Powers**) that fall within the god's sphere but aren't directly granted by that god. In the absence of the god, the GM could require the newly unconstrained advantages be rebuilt with limitations like Unreliable or Uncontrollable, with extra points gained used to add new capabilities or increase existing ones, perhaps including ones previously reserved to gods themselves.

The ultimate extension of this may be the clue to saving the world after the departure of the god. This is the idea that someone with magical or other powers that derive from the same general source as the god, and which can still function after the god's death, might be in line to *replace* the god. In game terms, the path to apotheosis may involve gathering sufficient powers to duplicate, at least in an embryonic sense, the abilities of the god. Once these are achieved, an appropriately awe-inspiring series of trials and tribulations could eventually lead to the person becoming a god himself. (See **GURPS Fantasy** p. 33.)

Gods are also often presented as influencing human emotions, e.g., a love god inflames passion or a war god or king of the gods grants courage to his worshippers. The GM may wish to select a number of advantages or disadvantages that require die rolls to activate, such as those needing self-control rolls, and apply penalties or bonuses after the god is dead. For instance, the death of a war god may impose -1 to self-control rolls to resist Cowardice but give +1 to rolls to avoid succumbing to Bloodlust. The effects could be counter-intuitive: If the dead god of war was one, such as Athena, who encouraged formal battle rather than slaughter, the god's death might include a penalty on rolls to resist Berserk. At the campaign level, more NPCs may appear or develop advantages or disadvantages that the god was opposed to, with appropriate social effects as the fabric of reality unravels. The death of a war god may see organized battles degenerating into confused brawls, soldiers going berserk or fleeing the field, and more people acquiring disadvantages like Cowardice or Pacifism. The death of a love god may see fewer courtships, more marriages collapsing into arguments, family and friends turning against one another, etc. Likewise, more people might develop disadvantages like Loner or have an easier time resisting Lecherousness.

DEATH AND REBIRTH OF A PANTHEON

Instead of a single god dying, what if multiple gods, perhaps an entire pantheon, were suddenly struck down? That was the central premise in my last major fantasy campaign. The gods dwelt in a variety of semi-otherworldly locations (similar to the idea of Mount Olympus) but, like the Greek gods, regularly interacted with mortals.

Yet suddenly that . . . stopped.

The actual cause of this was unknown to the world. But the mass murder of the gods brought forth chaos and war among mortals, some of whom no longer feared things like a divine judgment for evil deeds. It was up to the heroes to step up and figure out some way to forge a new pantheon from the ashes of the old.

One of the ways of doing so was to locate the regalia of the gods, mighty artifacts that embodied much of their power and had been lost where they had died or were left behind in their homes. Who would seize the Eye of the Storm, or the Chariot of the Sun?

The natural order was breaking down, with monster outbreaks, walking dead, wild weather, and unnatural disasters. Even the stars began falling from the heavens! The revival of a single god would not bring order: All divine powers had to be embodied in a stable new pantheon. Until then, neo-gods and demi-gods arose, and various pretenders, such as arch-mages and powerful monsters, attempted to fill the vacuum the gods had left, whether for good or ill. Besides a murderous trickster god, the major threat involved the machinations of a rival group of mortals and would-be demigods that intended to opportunistically use the death of the gods to usher in the birth of a new pantheon of evil gods.

So, in addition to becoming the midwives to a new pantheon, they also had to solve a cosmic murder mystery: Who had killed the gods, how, and why?

The mystery? In my campaign, it involved the machinations of a Loki-like trickster god, some outsider demons, and some mortal sorcerers. It also had the revelation that a otherworldly poison created from the blood of a primal entity had been used to kill the gods when they met for a banquet to celebrate a divine wedding.

Paths to Apotheosis

Depending on the power level of the campaign, the PCs could be bystanders who just have to survive in a changing universe, or actually involved in an attempt to replace or resurrect the gods themselves.

The most likely people to replace a pantheon are those mortals (human or otherwise) who have some divine blood as a result of past liaisons between gods and mortals. This doesn't necessarily mean they are super-powered demi-gods, but they may be grandchildren or more distant descendents of deities. The simplest way to handle immortal blood is just give the protagonists appropriate powers (see **GURPS Powers**) that fit the nature of the god they are descended from.

To give a feel of breakdown in natural law, I assumed the universe itself was conspiring to "push" candidates to godhood. In game terms, that meant awarding 10 times as many character points as usual for any adventure in which they gained knowledge of their divine progenitors, acquired artifacts associated with them, or performed quests specific to the divine aspects they needed to assume.

For example, a player whose character was descended from the assassinated earth goddess ended up seeking out the river bed that held the clay of life that had been used to create the first humans. Once he and his friends defeated various guardians and acquired the clay, he got what amounted to a pool of 50 bonus character points (10 times the normal award) to buy a set of abilities associated with his Earth power and the Create advantage from **GURPS Powers**.

> *It is fear that first brought gods into this world.*
>
> – *Petronius*

ABOUT THE COLUMNIST

David L. Pulver is a Canadian freelance author. An avid SF fan, he began roleplaying in junior high with the newly released **Basic Dungeons & Dragons.** Upon graduating from university, he decided to become a game designer. Since then, David has written over 70 roleplaying game books, and he has worked as a staff writer, editor, and line developer for Steve Jackson Games and Guardians of Order. He is best known for creating **Transhuman Space,** co-authoring the **Big Eyes, Small Mouth** anime RPG, and writing countless **GURPS** books, including the **GURPS Basic Set,** *Fourth Edition,* **GURPS Ultra-Tech,** and the **GURPS Spaceships** series.

In the Jungle

by Jason Brick

Dungeons are a core part of the fantasy genre, from a sapper's tunnels to a cavern complex to the Mines of Moria. If adventurers have a native habitat, that habitat is the dungeon. Dungeons are . . .

Exotic. The dripping walls, echoing caves and eerie passages set a scene that reminds everybody they're in a fantasy adventure. It's a keystone, like swords and dragons, that keeps everybody immersed in the genre.

Restrictive. They provide limited, but interesting and meaningful choices. Every dungeon is essentially a flowchart of if/then decisions and their consequences. This lets the GM put all of his energy into a handful of possibilities, rather than spreading mental energy thin with a wider array of potential scenarios.

Full of action. A dungeon can be smaller than a football field, yet home to dozens of memorable encounters. This is possible because the walls and tunnels block lines of sight, separating areas into discrete sections despite actually being quite close. This is the same phenomenon that makes a house feel larger than its yard, though the opposite is probably true.

Built on multiple levels. Each level can represent a different theme, level of danger, or new set of inhabitants. Moving up or down a dungeon level creates a natural flow in the narrative of exploration, and can serve as a milestone in an adventuring party's journey.

Inherently hazardous. They're filled with traps, pits, deadfalls, and chances to plummet from precipitous heights. These features may exist on their own, or might be part of a larger context serving as clues for exploration or added challenge in a fight.

Home to monsters. They are often packed with an improbably density of alpha predators, considering the available food supply. Ecology aside, these dark destinations are home to an array of critters with jaws to bite and claws to catch the unwary. This population is one of the two main reasons adventurers enter a dungeon.

Stocked with loot. This is the other reason treasure-hunters put dungeons on their adventuring itinerary. Down below, wealth awaits the brave in the form of coins, gems, art, and magical goodies.

All of these traits contribute to making dungeons the fantasy staple they are, but even dungeons can become boring over the course of a long-standing campaign. What was once exotic becomes commonplace. But how can the GM provide a new adventuring environment while keeping the benefits of a typical delve? Where can adventurers find all the features, hazards, and inhabitants of their favorite underground locales? By going up!

The Canopy Forest

Dark passages wind between roots and trunks, while natural spires tower to dizzying heights above. Strange beasts prowl at every level of this ecosystem, filling the air with the sounds of their hunting, running, killing and dying. Strange treasures, natural and artificial, lie waiting to be discovered. All in all, the canopy forest provides all the benefits of dungeon adventuring wrapped in a new package. These ecosystems . . .

Are just as exotic as dungeons. Fantasy roleplayers like dungeon adventuring because no fantasy roleplayer has visited a monster-stocked dungeon . . . but many fantasy heroes have. Unless a gaming group includes field biologists, the reaches of a canopy forest are new to both the players and their explorers.

Limit choices with a series of meaningful decisions. Only so many paths up and down vines, through the brush and along high limbs can exist in the labyrinthine expanse of a dense canopy. Explorers navigate these byways just as they would an underground passage.

Restrict lines of sight with brush, leaves, hanging moss, and the deep darkness of forest shade. This creates the same densely packed action as the best tunnel complex.

Exist on multiple levels. Each canopy layer has a different environment, with its own traits, inhabitants, and hazards. Many layers are thick enough to subdivide into levels of their own. Adventurers make vertical passage by climbing tree trunks, shinnying up vines, and following branches as they wind up or down through the foliage.

Are full of hazards. Visitors must walk and fight along limbs far above ground. They have to stay alert for venomous and diseased native life, quicksand, and deadfalls. The thick bush of a canopy forest is no place for the timid or unprepared.

Support a population of dangerous beasts. Each level of the canopy forest is home to an array of alpha predators. These range from large hunting carnivores to territorial omnivores to hordes of stinging and venomous insects. Every one of them is more at home in the crowded, treacherous upper limbs than any member of the adventuring party.

Reward adventurers with loot. On Earth, scientists call tropical rainforests "the world's pharmacy" because of the wealth of valuable plants found inside. Pelts, specimens, and rare woods are other examples of the treasure waiting for those brave enough to harvest them.

All of this is true of real-world canopy forests. These are exotic, dangerous places rife for exploration even before adding magic, monsters, and other fantasy elements. Once the GM includes some intelligent and savage civilizations, a tree-dwelling dragon or two, and a network of nests for giant ants, a forest becomes the perfect milieu for fantasy adventure.

Canopy Forest Basics

Ecologically speaking, a canopy forest is a forest where densely packed trees form a cover of leaves and branches above ground level. Canopy forests on Earth are most common in tropical areas. These tropical rainforests contain the world's second-largest collection of biomass, second only to the oceans. Temperate canopy forests are less common, but found in parts of Canada, Northern Europe, Russia, and the United States. Both kinds of forest are home to a variety of evergreen and deciduous tree species, along with a complex web of animal and plant life.

Layers and Levels

Their layered structure is the most distinctive – and most dungeonlike – feature of canopy forests. Natural canopy forests grow in five distinct layers, though a fantasy world can host trees that grow in as many layers as the GM likes.

Emergent Layer

Rising above the general layer of the canopy, this band is to the rest of the forest as trees are to a field. Every forest hosts a handful of tree species that grow taller than the others. These tend to be thinner, with broad leaves to gather as much light as possible. They poke up into the sunlight, standing proudly over the surrounding foliage. Real-life emergent layers reach a height of 210' to 250'. Birds, bats, butterflies, eagles, and monkeys live and thrive in this sunniest part of the woods.

Dungeon levels in the emergent layer consist of tree islands with wide open spaces in between. Encounters feature mobility and balance, as adventurers and their adversaries jump, fly, or zip-line from treetop to treetop. Falling is an obvious hazard, though heat stroke and sun blindness are equally serious dangers of visits to this level.

Canopy Layer

The roof of the forest is a thick zone of interlocking branches and overlapping leaf clusters. Canopy trees have thick trunks and limbs, and small leaves that can survive in a densely packed environ. This cluster of brush shields lower layers from sun and rain, casting a perpetual twilight shadow down below. This is the most populated area of the forest. Abundant leaves and fruits feed the herbivores, who provide a tasty buffet for the layer's predators. Snakes, birds, monkeys, tree frogs, and smaller mammals call this layer home. Earthly canopies form at the 90' to 150' range.

This layer is a maze of branches, vines, and leaves offering a dungeon's worth of passages and chambers. Hollowed-out trees – whether by fire, animal, or intelligent construction – offer options and flavor to a journey through the leaves. Falling is less of a danger at this level, since opportunities abound for a tumbling explorer to catch a hold. Visitors should instead watch closely for venomous plants and vermin, sharp thorns, bladed leaves, and trapping masses of vines.

The Understory

Tall shrubs in the 8' to 12' range make up this layer, sprouting wide leaves built to catch the maximum load of what sunlight trickles past the canopy and emergent layers. Residents include big cats, monkeys, great apes, and an astonishing variety of insects. Understory brush forms its own interlocking level of fronds, leaves, and creepers. This layer is more akin to a web or net than a network of roads made from limbs – but it's possible for that net to support the weight of careful adventurers.

Exploring this level might mean climbing into separate oases of understory plants, or moving from copse to copse among the trees themselves. Vines hang down and trunks reach up, allowing access to the upper bands. Falling is less lethal at this level, but more common – many surfaces only *look* solid enough to walk or crawl across.

Forest Floor

Little light reaches this layer, meaning it's sparser than most people expect. Small plants, fungus colonies, and carpets of moss are more common than larger foliage. The exception is any open area, such as a large clearing or riverbank. Here, plant life explodes into a nearly impenetrable wall of brush. Giant anteaters, sloths, wild pigs, big cats, bears, and other large animals wander here.

Just as adventurers travel overland to reach a dungeon, they'll walk the forest floor to access the upper levels of a jungle dungeon. This overland travel could feature natural hazards, predators, and intelligent attackers – or it could be a colorful cut-scene to the heart of the adventure.

Subterranean

Some, but not all, ecologists include this level in the definition of a canopy forest. It doesn't refer to the deep reaches of the earth, but rather the first 10' or so beneath the forest floor. This is a thick mat of rich soil and decomposing vegetable matter, run through with tree roots and small burrows. Hollows and temporary excavations come and go as animals move in and out, trees uproot, and large falls from upper levels leave craters in the soft earth.

Any number of reasons could lead to a tunnel network boring through the subterranean level of a canopy forest, providing a more dungeon-like part of the entire canopy environ. Some tunnels might lead still deeper into a traditional stone-walled and dripping underground environ.

*See **Odds and Ends** (p. 37) for canopy-character creation ideas.*

Designing Canopy Dungeons

In many aspects, canopy dungeons are designed like any other subterranean maze or abandoned keep. This is good news because a GM can insert them without much of a learning curve. It can also be bad news, since the similarities can lead players to forget they're in a new environment. Focusing on some key characteristics of canopy forests can keep games on the right track.

Look and Feel

Winding passages and occasional clearings create a dungeonesque environment, so creating the *structure* of a canopy dungeon isn't much different from that of a "normal" complex.

Flat branches act as tunnels, as do hollow passages through the trees themselves. Rooms and chambers could be especially wide branches, or a nexus of several limbs. Elevating branches and vines replace stairs and shafts.

Just as underground dungeons include constructed chambers as well as natural caves, the GM can set tree houses, bridges, and scaffolds among the limbs to make the environment more complex and memorable. These can even include chunks of a ruin that started at ground level, but lifted up as the trees grew over centuries.

Instead of focusing on the structure of a canopy dungeon, the GM should highlight the exotic location by concentrating on its *feel*. This colorful description, especially small details, reminds players they aren't in a typical dungeon anymore. Travel writing about this environment uses all five senses to depict the rich experience of life in the bush.

Canopy forests look green, but with so many shades of green that some look more like yellows, blacks, and oranges. The air is redolent with the earth and spice smells of decomposing plant life, so thick that the smell becomes a taste. In the tropics, humidity grips visitors like a clammy hand, and a constant drizzle of rain wet down those in a temperate zone. Most of all, canopy forests – especially jungles – are noisy. Even when the abundant animal life doesn't call, roar, clack, buzz, howl, and hoot, the wind blows leaves and creaks branches in an endless susurrus. Silence can only mean the arrival of a predator – usually one that's intelligent and hostile.

Hazards and Challenges

Imagining a compelling trap or hazard for a canopy dungeon boils down to thinking of something other than falling out of a tree. This isn't to say falling isn't a danger when adventurers move and fight through the trees. It's just that falling is such a ubiquitous hazard it can become boring, or even annoying. One solution is to up the ante by creating obstacles that involve "falling plus."

In such a hazard, whether or not someone falls is only the beginning. A falling explorer might catch himself after only a few tumbling feet, but might be stuck on the only handhold for yards around. That handhold could even be sharp poisonous, or maliciously intelligent. At the least, a falling hazard can split up the party just as an enemy makes its attack.

Classic dungeon traps have a canopy equivalent. Arrow and needle traps might be stet by native tree dwellers, or the random result of how thorny plants grew. Quicksand replaces flooding room traps, and breaks in the canopy create open chasms for adventurers to somehow cross. Just as it's possible to insert actual buildings into the upper forest reaches, some of those buildings could still contain functioning – or malfunctioning – traps.

Building an interesting canopy encounter is easier than creating one for a regular dungeon, because bare 30-by-30 rooms are rare up in the trees. The limbs and leaves form terrain that can be a useful ally or vicious enemy. Snipers, chase scenes, and guerilla attacks all get *interesting* when everybody is running along branches 100' above the ground.

Getting Fantastic

Nearly everything described above is possible in a no-magic, realistic, even modern-day setting. Just as fantasy elements turn a normal cave complex into a memorable dungeon, fantasy canopy forests are easy to transform into something even more dangerous and exciting than the real thing.

Changing the population is one of the easiest ways to "fantasy up" a canopy forest. Dragons, wild elves, and fanged beasts of all kinds can transform an already teeming jungle into a running battle. Giant bugs are a natural for the forest primeval, as are huge reptiles, from monster snakes to dinosaurs.

Flight, whether from spells or fantastic physiology, transforms adventures in a forest canopy – especially in the emergent layer. Bats and eagles live up there for a reason. Adventure goals requiring flight can showcase character talents, while attackers with wings can take advantage of the explorers' restricted movement.

Elves are the traditional arboreal fantasy race, but canopy forests could hide even more alien civilizations. Peoples based on frogs, snakes, bats, or monkeys could build complex cultures that never reach the ground. Some might live in nests or hollows, while others could build sprawling cities of catwalks, tree houses, and rope swings.

Biomes outside the temperate and tropical zones could host fantasy forests. Enormous ice trees, sandstone columns, and mysterious obelisks could form in layers of life, danger, and adventure. Magical underwater breathing can give explorers access to multi-layered kelp forests beneath the ocean waves. Deep underground, the roots of a canopy forest could grow downward into a vast cavern, forming a second series of layers.

Numerous earthly myths describe trees with branches or roots leading to far places, other worlds, or alternate universes. A sufficiently magical fantasy forest could host an entire campaign based on exploring a single ancient tree.

Spells create an opportunity for forest construction, exploration, and deforestation on a scale unimaginable in the real world. This can form the basis for an adventure, or simply help form the structure and appearance of a fantasy canopy forest.

Far-Reaching Consequences

One aspect of forest dangers, especially tropical forests, is that they often last well past when the immediate danger ends. A simple thorn prick can quickly grow into a life-threatening infection in the muggy heat – and that's without the toxins that seem appallingly common among jungle flora. See pp. B437-444 for details on inserting disease and poisons into adventures.

Extraction issues are also common in stories of jungle disasters. It's challenging, but reasonable, to drag a crippled ally out of a dungeon. Not so to lower him 200' from the emergent layer to the ground.

About the Author

Jason Brick is a freelance writer whose 30-year gaming habit has included all four versions of **GURPS** and countless other systems. His work can be found in print and dead tree magazines worldwide. In his spare time, he enjoys travel, martial arts, and time with his family. Read more at his blog, **brickcommajason.com**.

THE GNOMISH MAFIA

BY MEGAN McDONALD

Twenty years ago, Montague Crane walked into town and started building his "family business." Over the years, the gnome picked up a large client base, a small fortune, and a nickname: Monty One-Eye. The Gnomish Mafia now controls and regulates all of the area's criminal activities, though they focus on protection and loan sharking. This article details the principal members of the family and their outstanding business deals, tips for how and where to use the Mafia and some adventure seeds.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE

These are the most significant members of the family business.

Montague "Monty One-Eye" Crane

The capo of the Gnomish Mafia, Monty controls all of the crime that happens in this city. If he doesn't authorize it, it doesn't happen. Monty has been running this organization for two decades, and he looks ready to serve a few decades longer. Monty loves good wine, fine food, and a good game of chance, though he often regrets his indulgences in the morning. Before Monty started his business, he worked as a mercenary, gaining valuable combat experience and losing an eye.

Frederick "Freddy Fingers" Crane

Monty's younger brother and right-hand man, Freddy balances the books and makes sure the money flows where and when it's supposed to. In addition to being good at accounting, he's also an accomplished lute player. While Monty spent his time learning to fight, Freddy dedicated himself to more academic pursuits. As such, he relies on talking his way out of problems, and outsmarting his enemies, instead of tests of strength or martial skill.

Lorna Pool

A smart, ruthless beauty, Lorna can kill a man in a hundred different ways, most of them very, very painful. When Monty wants someone to learn a lesson, Lorna is the one he sends to teach it. Rumor has it she's been seen sneaking into and out of Monty's room late at night, though no one would dare mention it where she might hear. When Lorna fights, she likes to cut her enemy down at the knees, literally. She will start with a blow to the knees or ankles to immobilize her foe and bring him down to her level, before going in for a killing blow. This isn't strictly necessary; she just prefers her prey to suffer some before they die.

How to Use the Gnomish Mafia

The Gnomish Mafia can be dropped into any small- to mid-size town that the adventurers wander in to on their travels. If the adventure is set in a large city, the Mafia is likely to only control one neighborhood or district.

The Gnomish Mafia can be used in a game set in any fantasy setting that allows for non-human races, from ancient to medieval to steampunk. Not much would have to change in a low-fantasy game, or a low-mana high fantasy one. If the setting is high mana, the Mafia will also likely employ magic users, though the principal actors can remain the same.

While there will be townsfolk who dislike the Mafia and its control of the city, others will probably support its efforts. For example, in a town or city where a despotic government reigns, the Mafia may seem the lesser of two evils to the cowed citizenry. How each NPC reacts to the Mafia and its activities is up to the GM, but it's reasonable to expect a variety of responses to the organization and its dealings. Universal love or hate is unrealistic.

William "Little Will" Crane

When Will showed up on Monty's doorstep five years ago claiming to be his long-lost son, the other members of the family were skeptical. Monty immediately took the boy in, however, and sponsored him for membership in the organization. He never explained why he believed the young gnome's story, but he seems to accept it whole-heartedly. Will is still a low-level member of the family, serving mainly as muscle, but it seems obvious to the others that he is being groomed by the capo for a leadership position. Little Will believes in physical fitness, and he prefers to take out a foe with his bare hands if possible. He has the skill to be a professional boxer, and has been trying to convince his father to start a legal fighting competition in the area, for people of all sizes.

Constance "Connie Deals" Bright

Connie handles the public side of the family, finding new clients, settling disputes between protected businesses, and managing the reputation of the organization. She also runs the outreach program and the charitable works the family does to maintain its goodwill within the community. She's a fast-talking, charismatic ball of energy, and her good humor goes a long way toward making the family's control of the area more palatable to the townsfolk.

Thomasina "Tinker" Wright

When the gnomes get ready to go out on a job, they stop by Tinker's workshop first. As the quartermaster of the Mafia, she's in charge of keeping swords sharp, bowstrings taut, and leather oiled. In addition to designing cunning traps and lures, Tinker likes to play with new poison-delivery methods and things that explode. While some in the family find her stereotypical interests insulting, she refuses to be embarrassed by her abilities and her interests, and answers proudly to the nickname she's been given.

> *Do not trust a malicious man because you have long been intimate with him. A serpent will still bite, though it may have been kept and tended a long time.*
> **– Panchatantra**

WHAT THEY'RE REALLY UP TO

The Mafia is usually pretty tight lipped about their business dealings, but that's never stopped people from speculating. Over the years, dozens of crimes have been credited to the Mafia, though, Monty is quick to point out, none have been proven.

Deals With Slavers

While slavers have proven a problem in the surrounding area, they seem to give Monty's domain a wide berth. Townsfolk speculate that Monty has made some sort of deal with the leaders to keep "his" people safe. Since this has been good for them, few are interested in finding out the truth, for fear that things might change for the worse. The truth of it is, Monty has made a deal with the slavers. In exchange for a regular delivery of slaves, they agree to leave off kidnapping the townsfolk. These unfortunates are mostly bandits and other ne'er-do-wells who have committed crimes against protected businesses. A few of Monty's enemies, however, have also ended up mixed in with the criminals "accidentally."

Smuggling

Sometimes, people need to get a hold of things that aren't strictly legal in the area. With a casual mention, and an inconspicuous payment to Monty, the goods miraculously appear at their homes or offices in the next few days. No one asks where the goods come from, or how they are acquired, but no one has any illusions as to their origins. This service is not available to just anyone, however. Monty won't procure goods if he thinks the recipient plans to sell them. He likes to control who has access to the things he supplies. He will also refuse to supply weapons if he thinks they will be used against the townsfolk.

Crime Spree

When Monty first started soliciting business for his protection agency, he got few takers. After a wave of thefts and vandalism swept through the area, though, local business owners began to see the benefits of securing his protection. Most people believe that Monty's people either committed the crimes themselves, or that the Mafia contracted out the work to freelancers. The truth is, Monty got lucky. A group of thieves had decided to try their hand at creating their own criminal organization at the same time that Monty started offering protection from just those threats. After a few of the thieves were caught, and dealt with by the Mafia, the group disbanded and moved to friendlier territory. Monty doesn't correct the record because he believes that the story lends his organization a needed aura of danger.

Bribery

Monty's employees occasionally get out of hand. They never end up getting arrested or detained by the local law, however, the way that drunk and belligerent townsfolk do. Most people assume that Monty has some sort of deal with the local law to keep his people out of their custody. This is true, but not in quite the way people think. While Monty does have an understanding with the local law, it isn't a matter of paying them to look the other way. Instead, Monty has assured the law that any punishment they might mete out will pale in comparison to what he will do to his own people if they disturb the peace or, gods forbid, cause any real damage. Monty has, so far, been true to his word.

OUTSTANDING BUSINESS

The following townspeople have outstanding business with the Gnomish Mafia and may seek the aid of outsiders to help them in their dealings with the family.

Greta

When her husband got sick, Greta approached Monty for a loan to help her feed her five children while her husband recovered. Sadly, her husband never regained his former vigor. Though still alive, he has never been able to return to work. Because of this, Greta has found it increasingly difficult to pay back the loan and provide for her family. Monty has extended her loan several times, but his generosity is nearing its limits. Greta is afraid of what he might do when he finds that she will not have the funds to make her next payment.

Colin

An enterprising young law-enforcement official, Colin has been investigating the mysterious disappearance of two businessmen who had very public disagreements with Monty. He's sure that Monty is somehow involved, but he hasn't been able to prove it. Any information on the disappearances would help him to make his case, and his career, but would likely put the investigators squarely on the wrong side of the Mafia.

Ollie

For as long as he can remember, Ollie has wanted to join the Gnomish Mafia. The only problem is, he's not a gnome. Monty is impressed with the young man's moxie, but rather firm on the racial requirement for joining his organization. Undeterred, Ollie shows up on Monty's doorstep every morning to argue his case, and every morning, Monty sends him home again. The young man's dedication is edging dangerously close to desperation, and his friends are worried what lengths he'll go to prove his worth to the capo.

Emma

Once a member in good standing with the Mafia, Emma chose to "retire" a few years ago. Normally, former members don't live long enough to enjoy their retirement, but Emma is a special case. She's Monty's ex-wife. The current members see her as a threat to the organization and would prefer her to "disappear," but Monty won't allow it. This has caused some friction within the organization as she is seen as a weakness that the capo can ill afford.

Adventure Seeds

Succession: Will seems to be the capo's choice to succeed him, but the other powerful members of the organization don't consider it a done deal. The PCs might be approached by an agent of one of these disgruntled mafiosi (or the mafioso himself!) to find a way to eliminate the competition. The plan might be to discredit one of the others with "proof" of his disloyalty or fraud, or a straight-up assassination. Either way, it's going to be tough to take out a well-protected member of a powerful crime syndicate.

A Plea for Aid: A family member or friend of one of the PCs has found himself on the wrong side of the Mafia. He may ask for the party's help in paying off a debt, negotiating a new deal, or extricating him from the situation. Conversely, he may require the party's help to buy himself protection from the Mafia, settle a dispute with a business rival who is already a client, or orchestrate a situation in which he can prove his worth to the capo.

Balance of Power: While the local leaders turn a blind eye to the Mafia's dealings, if presented with a plan to eliminate it, they may change their tune. Breaking the Mafia's grip on the town will be a struggle – they're a well-oiled, well-equipped machine of death and pain, after all – but it's not an impossible task for a group of talented, law-abiding heroes.

Gang Wars: The Gnomish Mafia is not the only organized-crime outfit in the city. If a turf war erupts between rival families, the PCs may find themselves in the middle. They may want to choose sides, broker a peace deal, or try to rid the town of all of its seedier elements.

Initiation: A group of young, recently sponsored gnomes have just started their training and proving period to gain full membership into the Mafia. It's a long process that involves plenty of grunt work, but the survivors, if there are any, will reap the benefits of being a member in good standing of the most powerful organization in the city.

A Mole: Monty has a suspicion that someone in his organization may be working for another team: the local law, a rival organization, or an old enemy. A group of outsiders, pretending to be new members, might be just the thing he needs to find the traitor and prove his disloyalty.

Not Just Another Thieves Guild

The Gnomish Mafia may seem like a standard-issue thieves guild at first glance, but they differ in two very important ways.

First, the Mafia does not accept applications. If a current member thinks you might be Mafia material, he can sponsor you for a trial membership, of sorts. If your sponsor is able to convince Monty that you're a worthy candidate, you'll still have to complete a long, complicated, and often deadly training and proving period. Joining the family is not something you can do on a whim. Potential new members have to dedicate years of their lives to proving their worth, and most don't live long enough to become full members.

Second, and most importantly, the Gnomish Mafia's main business is protection. As such, thieves who attempt to steal from a protected business or individual will be hunted down and punished. Freelancers are not tolerated. If the Mafia finds out you've been operating in the city without their permission, expect a visit from some very angry, well-armed gnomes.

About the Author

Megan McDonald has been writing professionally since 2006, specializing in gaming, crafting, and cooking. Megan runs games at conventions and for friends, and has been playing roleplaying games (computer, tabletop, and play-by-email) for 15 years. Her life goals include being the first person to win a Pulitzer Prize for a video-game tie-in novel, and playing the voice of the computer in a movie, television show, or video game.

The Children of the Coming Darkness

by J. Edward Tremlett

*"In the name of our God, most merciless, most cruel . . ."
the pale monster raged, low in the pit, astride the pile of the
plague-dead.*

*"Recite!" the throngs before him screamed, caked in mud
and wearing masks made of skulls, or in the image of insects. In
the darkness below Gebel-al-Hikmah, they seemed ghostly and
immaterial, save for their masks, which glowed with unhal-
lowed phosphorescence.*

*"I bring you the words of the Father of Flies!" the ghoul con-
tinued, raising his taloned hands to the stone ceiling, high above.
"I bring you his promise! His gift! His commandments! Surely
we shall do no wrong with his word to guide us!"*

As if on cue, the pile of the dead below his hooves began to stir.

*"Surely I say to you, successful indeed are the believers, who are
fervent in their prayers, and mighty in their deeds, for surely they
shall inherit death on the final day, and be given the final sleep!"*

*The corpses began to crawl from under the monster, and
regain their footing. A cloud of flies filled the fetid cavern air, and
the throngs rejoined and made merry with the undead, hoping
that they might be made holy with the bite of an insect, and
allowed the final sleep before the end of things to come . . .*

> *They prepare for the Day of Flies,
> when a terrible doom will be unleashed.*

The dark art of Necromancy is generally – and thankfully –
not known on Yrth. The reasons for this are not entirely clear,
but, given the antipathy the three major religions share for
trafficking with the dead, its omission from mages' toolkits is
a very welcome thing.

However, in dark and horrid places, the forbidden knowl-
edge still lives. Birthed from a tragic encounter with a decay-
ing city in the Great Desert, the cult calling itself the Children
of the Coming Darkness meets in the heart of Gebel-al-
Hikmah, deep underground. There, in the forgotten places of
the capitol city, they practice abhorred rites, call the dead up
from their slumber, and make contact with something that
seeks to literally end all life on Yrth.

The Father of Flies is awakening, and he promises death
to all . . .

This article details the secret history of the Children, their
ways and means, and how they might be used in a campaign.
It also offers some suggestions on what the Father of Flies
might actually be. While it's intended for use with ***GURPS
Banestorm,*** with a slight rewrite, the cult could be used in any
fantasy campaign with a Middle-Eastern analogue.

The Opening of the Grave

The Children of the Coming Darkness has its genesis in one
of the more foolish maneuvers of the Great Crusade. In a des-
perate move in 1465, one of Al-Haz's Commanders, Jamail
Muhammad ibn-Muhammad al-Kawakeb, decided to disobey
his orders, take his detachment to the west, and skirt the edges
of the Great Forest and the Great Desert in the hopes of taking
the Christian forces by surprise.

Halfway to his goal, he spied something off in the distance
of the desert – something that looked like a crumbling, long-
abandoned city rising up from the sands. Electing to take ten
of his best men and investigate, he ordered the others to stay
until he returned. The rest of the detachment duly waited for
seven days and seven nights before deciding that Commander
Al-Kawakeb had fallen prey to a mirage, and continued on
with his plan as best they could.

Their poor attempt at a sneak attack is still recounted in
bawdy songs by the bards of what is now Caithness. Those
who survived being captured were questioned and imprisoned.
Those who survived incarceration eventually returned home in
a prisoner exchange at the end of hostilities. The few survivors
were not shocked to discover that their Commander had not
been seen since.

Not that there was much to see. The Commander had,
indeed, found something in that desert, but, more importantly,
something had found *him*. The something in question kept the
11 men captive for the next 500 years. Then it remade them in
a more fitting image, and sent them back where they had come
from, loaded with dark knowledge and hideous purpose.

Commander Al-Kawakeb now lives in near darkness, deep
within the rat-infested pits of the old parts of Gebel al-Hikmah.

From there, he preaches the word of *Abu Thubab* – the Father of Flies – to his filthy and insane followers. There, in the dark, they prepare for the Day of Flies, when a terrible doom will be unleashed upon the world, and a fitting sacrifice of an entire city will bring their dark father to Yrth.

CHILDREN SAVAGE AND BLIND

The cult is lead by the Commander, now known as the *Hafiz*, in recognition of his having memorized the *Kitab al-Thubab* – the Book of Flies. He and the five members of his inner retinue are ghouls who have specially modified by the strange entity they encountered in the ruins of the elven city. He originally had 10 in his retinue, but they have been lost over the last couple decades, mostly because they argued over something the rest of the cult isn't privy to. The survivors have obviously learned to hold their tongues.

The rest of the cult is human, and number between 50 and 100 at any given time. The fluctuations are caused by suicide, homicide, sacrifice, and disease. They recruit from the lowest of the low: broken souls, the insane, murderers, and those who foolishly dabble in the dark arts in spite of the kingdom's harsh edicts against magic. Such persons are "recruited" by other cult members, often at knife-point, and brought down to the deepest pits of Gebel-al-Hikmah. There, they are made to sleep with the plague dead for seven days and nights. Those who succeed join the cult. Those who fail join the dead.

The Children practice a debased form of Islam, in which the five pillars are willingly subverted. They renounce Allah in favor of the Father of Flies, pray to their new god five times a day while facing away from Geb'-al Din, steal from those weaker than they, glut themselves during the holy month of Ramadan, and have vowed to only undertake the *hajj* once the Day of Flies has occurred, and the world begins to die. Then they plan to shatter the black rock as a final sign of piety to their god, and hope he will strike them dead at that very moment.

On Fridays, the faithful go to their mosque in the deepest pit of all to hear the *Hafiz* recite from the Book of Flies from memory. No written copies of that book are allowed, and writing anything that is said down is cause to be torn to pieces and fed to the inner retinue. The Children are encouraged to memorize the verses as they are revealed, but are not entitled to debate their meaning – only obey.

The cult's plan is both diabolical and gruesome, and takes full advantage of the fact that magic is officially frowned upon in Al-Haz. The bubonic plague (**GURPS Banestorm,** p. 127) has been making the rounds in the holy city of Geb'-al-Din, and while those who die are given a Muslim burial, this is done in a secret graveyard, far from the city, so that no one knows there is a problem. The cult sends its members to the gates of the holy city to watch for the telltale signs of such a burial, follow the team to the gravesite, and then, once the internment is done, swoop in to collect the body.

These "holy corpses" are then brought back to Gebel-al-Hikmah, and added to the growing pile in their mosque. On Fridays the *Hafiz* animates the bodies, makes them recite from the Book of Flies, and dance around with the cult. When the Day of Flies is at hand, the entire pile will be animated, dressed as paupers, and sent out into the city to infect the population with their attendant fleas. Given the kingdom's antipathy toward magic, doubtlessly no concerted mystical effort will be made to cure this plague.

Once enough people are dead or dying, the cult will burst from underground. Together they will slay those who remain as a sacrifice to the Father of Flies, and, in doing so, raise enough power to bring him to Yrth.

Then, as the Book of Flies says, "The sky shall turn as black as sackcloth with the swarm of flies, and all shall know what has been done or left undone as the world is brought to its end . . ."

The Devil and the Details

In Islam, the Devil (*Iblis*) is a pathetic, near-powerless figure, as opposed to the near-omnipresent and dangerous character of contemporary Christianity. Cast out of Allah's grace for refusing to bow to Adam, *Iblis'* role consists of being an agent of temptation. He can plant evil suggestions in the hearts of mankind, but cannot compel anyone to do anything. A Muslim who says "the devil made me do it" should be considered a fool.

In that light, actively worshipping the Devil, or demonic servants, instead of following Islam is really trading down. *Iblis* doesn't have the power to grant anyone's desires, while Allah holds dominion over all things. That doesn't stop people from seeking to consort with the Devil or his cronies, but the payoff is so poor that only the truly insane and degraded would seek such a deal. At least with "Christian" Satanism, the supplicant gets something out of the bargain before payment is due!

The GM should understand this distinction before running a game in which the Children of the Coming Darkness play a part. These cultists are not the suave, manipulative people of wealth and taste one normally associates with Western diabolism. They are warped, broken remnants of humanity at best, and monsters wrapped in human skin at worst.

Those who have spent too long in the company of the Commander and his inner retinue may also be something less than human, depending on the GM's view of how ghoulishness is spread.

The Greater Ghoul

Not all ghouls are created equal. The *Hafiz* and his inner retinue can be designed mostly with the stats for ghouls from **GURPS Banestorm** (p. 200), but do not have a penalty on their IQ, and have the Unaging advantage (p. B95). These changes bring their base template up to 50 points, rather than the usual 15.

How powerful these ghouls are is up to the GM. Obviously the *Hafiz* has enough Necromancy to animate dead bodies, but how much his inner retinue has, if any, is debatable. His power may come from Magery, a magical artifact, or a spell that was cast on him by his mysterious patron from the elven city. The patron may even be working *through* him, which means he has no magic of his own.

He Will Tear the Sky Down

What is the Father of Flies, and what really happened in the elven city? There could be any number of equally valid answers, depending how powerful the GM wants to make the cult, and its invisible god.

Dark One: A powerful vampire set up its abode in the elven ruins well before the Commander strode in. As punishment for bothering its centuries-long studies of Necromancy, it cursed the 11 men: turning them into ghouls, and setting them to work for the next five centuries. Eventually, the men got the better of the creature, killed it, and raided his hoard of Necromantic tomes. Then they returned to Gebel-al-Hikmah to put their knowledge to use.

Djinn: One of the Ascended ones lived within the city, and decided to capture and study these "humans" to see how they worked. Five centuries later, he had all the information he needed, and, after turning them into ghouls for some unfathomable purpose, let them go. The *Hafiz,* driven insane by the endless vivisections and mental torture, and came up with his dark religion as an elaborate coping mechanism. The rest of the retinue adopted it as a mass psychosis, but as members have gotten better, and remembered what really happened, they've been killed by the true believers.

Dragon: What the Commander thought was a city was actually a portal to the cavern of a very old, very evil dragon.

He turned the 11 men into ghouls, so they could serve him longer, and indoctrinated them in the bleak, doomsday religion he'd been following for centuries. After 500 years, the dragon finally died, and the men rode the portal back to where they'd been picked up in the first place, so they might spread the faith they'd come to depend on.

Demon: The Father of Flies is a mask worn by a particularly mischievous demon. Sensing that he could have a lot of sport with the humans who dared come within sight of the Great Desert, he tempted them with an illusion, and then bound the 11 men into his eternal service once they stepped over his threshold. Over the next five centuries, he recited the Book of Flies to them, and they listened, and then he sent them off to do his "bidding." He has no plans to bring the Day of Flies about, because he doesn't have that kind of power – he just wants to see how far these fools will go.

Dimensional Entity: The Father of Flies is a loathsome creature from another plane of existence that can manifest on Yrth only at certain places, and certain times. The 11 men were unlucky enough to find him, 500 years ago. Five centuries later, following another conjunction, he spat his changed servants out onto the world so that they might find the way to bring him to Yrth for good. When the Day of Flies comes, he may appear as promised, or the summoning may be botched, and he'll have to wait another few centuries before trying again.

I Can Hear the Storm Come

There are a number of ways the Children of the Coming Darkness could be brought into a **GURPS Banestorm** campaign. The most obvious way is for the characters to be citizens of Al-Haz, or travelers passing through, who encounter the cult on one of its recruitment drives. In stopping it, they make a powerful enemy. They might also be adventuring through the darker corners of the city and blunder upon the cult by accident, though that might lead to a Total Party Kill, depending on how many Children are there that night.

The Hazards of Jihad: The protagonists are Balikites on the hunt for mages, and they have heard rumors of a dangerous cult deep within Gebel-al-Hikmah's undercity. Unfortunately, their intelligence is lacking as to what is really lurking down there. The Sultan's viziers are unlikely to take any survivors' claims of what they found all that seriously – especially since the Sultan *hates* Balikites. Can the PCs go back and finish the job themselves, or will they need to return home and get help?

The Tomb Watchers: It is indeed a terrible thing when a Muslim's grave is desecrated, as the body should be left intact to rise when the Day of Judgment comes. The robbing of plague victims' tombs has not gone unnoticed, and a detachment of quietly hired adventurers has been dispatched to watch the secret graveyard in the hopes of catching the thieves, or at least following them back to their employers. If they attack the Children, the cultists fight to the death, and die

before telling anything. But what happens if the watchers succeed in trailing them back to Gebel-al-Hikmah? What will they do when they get there?

Give Me the Book: A dangerous wizard in neighboring Al-Wazif has heard tales of the *Kitab-al-Thubab,* and wants to possess it for his own. He has, by way of various prognostications and scryings, discerned that it lies in the undercity of Gebel-al-Hikmah, but does not realize that it only exists in the memory of the *Hafiz.* So when he assembles the treasure-hunters; loads them with mundane weapons, magical trinkets, and gold coin to ease their way; and tells them to go and get him the book, he does not realize he's setting them up for failure. Unfortunately for the adventurers, the wizard does not tolerate failure: They'll either have to bring back the *Hafiz,* make him write down the book, or, worse, retrace the ghoul's steps to the ancient city in the sands where he learned the book in the first place. But what will they find there, waiting for them?

About the Author

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid,* has been the editor of *The Wraith Project,* and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu.* He's also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

THE DUODECENNIAL DEVIATIONS

BY STEVEN MARSH

Grandfather Kass reflected on the end of the Year of Holding. He had used this period to put his affairs in order. He hoped it wouldn't be necessary, but it was expected once one got to his age, and he'll do it again 12 years hence if given the chance. Fortune came next year. If his body could hold out, he could be sure to provide for his legacy . . . his grandchildren . . . his surviving children. It had been almost a decade since his beloved youngest – Clara – died. She was merely one of many; such is always the case in the Reaper's Year. It is the natural order of things.

Most efforts at changing fantasy worlds are done so on the physical level, with the addition of new lands, new races or monsters, and new developments. However, there is another vector that can be modified to radically alter a campaign: the fourth dimension – time.

> *To every thing there is a season . . .*
> *– Ecclesiastes 3:1*

THE TURNING WHEEL

Many calendar systems think in terms of cycles. For example, the Chinese zodiac consists of a 12-year cycle, with each year corresponding to an animal (which – in turn – has certain properties). Similarly the modern Western zodiac is a 12-month cycle where each sign has certain attributes.

However, what if these cycles weren't symbolic or difficult to prove? What if the year bestowed certain reliable, concrete characteristics to *everyone?*

What follows is one such system designed for use in any **GURPS Fantasy** game world. It relies heavily on the **GURPS Basic Set,** but the basic idea should be translatable to most fantasy games.

BEHOLD, THE DUODECENNIUM

Why the gods designed the universe around a 12-year cycle is for the priests to debate. However, the effect of the Duodecennium (as it is known) is felt by every sapient being . . . for good *and* ill.

Each year of the Duodecennium is named after the influence it has on the populace. In game terms, each year bestows a **GURPS** advantage or disadvantage on each and every sapient individual. While the broad effects of each year are known and understood by everyone – they are relatively obvious to sort out within even a generation – the exact boundaries and game effects of these influences should not be known with certainty. (After all, citizens of game worlds generally don't have access to the **GURPS Basic Set!**)

The Duodecennium is split into two six-year periods: Sexennium Bene and Sexennium Mal.

SEXENNIUM BONUM

The six years of Sexennium Bonum are a period of enlightenment, hope, and awareness.

THE YEAR OF SPRIT

Also known as the Haunting and Year of Ghosts, the Year of Spirit sees the walls between the spirit world and the mortal realm grow thinner. During this time, almost all common people can contact the recently departed (those who have passed on since the last Year of Spirit). Although it's a great comfort to some, this is a difficult year for parents and jailors, and often it's a challenging period for the world at large.

In fact, the deleterious effects of this year are sometimes so catastrophic that some people argue the Year of Spirit isn't a part of the Sexennium Bonum. However, if it isn't, then the only other symmetrical choice is the Year of Lies (p. 29) . . . which most scholars agree isn't logical. Some sages argue that an imbalance exists between the two Sexennia, and that they are more rightly called the Septennium Malum and Lustrum Bonum; however, the universal imbalance this would imply is too horrible for most people to consider.

Game Effects

During the Year of Spirit, everyone has Medium (Accessibility, Only to contact those who have departed or been created since the end of the last Year of Spirit, -20%) [8]. If someone possesses Medium normally, this year-bestowed ability doesn't stack with that one; however, lacking the Year of Spirit's limitation is a significant boon.

Since this ability can only contact those who have died after the end of the last Year of Spirit, many people have noted that the "safest" time to kill someone is at the end of the Year of Spirit. That way, there is little opportunity for such souls to get in touch the living. As a result, the last day of the Year of Spirit is known as the Silent Spirit Way.

THE YEAR OF ACUITY

A time of discovery and awakenings, the Year of Acuity (also known as the Year of Eyes, Year of Sight, and other variations) is marked by increased awareness. People can see and hear better during this period.

For the most part, life in the Year of Acuity results in relatively normal interpersonal relations. If you are more perceptive in seeing someone who wants to pick your pocket, the pickpocket is better able to see you seeing him. Significant failures of perception during this year are especially mocked.

However, all other matters of perception are greatly enhanced. This makes the Year of Acuity a time of great interest to (and discoveries by) astronomers, surveyors, explorers, and tax auditors.

Game Effects

During the Year of Acuity, everyone has Acute Hearing 1 [2], Acute Taste and Smell 1 [2], Acute Touch 1 [2], and Acute Vision 1 [2]. These advantages stack with any other sense or Perception bonuses – or offset penalties; individuals with natural sense- or Perception-enhancing abilities are often named Children of Acuity, in honor of the year. These bonuses are only bestowed upon those who have the senses in question; blind people do not receive the Acute Vision aspect of this year's boon (although they get the other advantages).

THE YEAR OF ACUMEN

Also known as the Sensible Year and the Callow Culling, the Year of Acumen is a time of good decision-making . . . or, perhaps more accurately, a time *lacking* poor decision-making. During the Year of Acumen, poor decisions are much more rare.

One side effect of the lack of poor decisions is that the Year of Acumen often results in a dearth of *interesting* decisions. Famous bards and entertainers almost never decided on their career path during the Callow Culling.

Game Effects

During the Year of Acumen, everyone has Common Sense [10]. This ability does not stack if someone already has Common Sense. However, such individuals are likely to be "touched by the Sensible," since they have the gift even in the remaining 11 years of the Duodecennium; that may be worth a Reputation bonus.

> *Man appears for a little while to laugh and weep, to work and play, and then to go to make room for those who shall follow him in the never-ending cycle.*
> *– Aiden Wilson Tozer*

THE YEAR OF HOLDING

The ravages of age are slowed considerably during the Year of Holding, and the elderly are "held" at their advanced age. Deaths and debilitations caused by aging still occur, but they are much rarer.

This makes Years of Holding valuable benchmarks in the lives of the aged, and they talk about living to see the next Holding; some cultures keep secondary track of age by counting these years ("Lord Klau has seen four Holdings, but his vizier has witnessed seven Holdings"). The end of the Year of Holding is often a time to put affairs in order, in case you don't live to see another Holding.

Game Effects

During the Year of Holding, everyone has Longevity [2]. Those who already possess Longevity temporarily gain Unaging [15]; for the duration of this year, they do not age.

THE YEAR OF FORTUNE

The most popular year of the Duodecennium, luck abounds during the Year of Fortune. Similar to the Year of Acuity, the effects of the Year of Fortune mostly tend to cancel each other out during most interpersonal relations. However, it is still a time of innovation, accomplishment, and discovery.

Game Effects

During the Year of Luck, everyone has Luck [15]. Those who already have Luck instead have Extraordinary Luck [30] at this time. Higher levels of ordinary Luck do not stack during this year, although the year-bestowed advantage stacks with Super Luck (p. B89) as normal.

The Year of Safety

During the Year of Safety – also known as the Seer's Year – the vagaries of fate seem to smile on the world. People are able to avoid injury and risk, and accidents are greatly reduced. Many assassins try to make names for themselves by carrying out their deeds during this year, since their reputations are greatly enhanced if they can overcome the protection of the Seer's Year.

This year is also known by some as the Year of the Oppressor, since this is an auspicious year to attack lesser forces with relative impunity. After all, if you only fear sneak attacks, traps, and other asymmetrical strikes, battles are much easier to win when your troops are warned of such methods.

Game Effects

During the Year of Safety, everyone has Danger Sense [15]. Those who already have Danger Sense instead gain Precognition [25] during this year. There is no further stacking for those with Precognition.

Sexennium Malum

Compared to the hope of Sexennium Bonum, the six years of Sexennium Malum are periods of metaphoric darkness brought about by tangible hardships.

The Year of Lies

Most years of the Duodecennium are fairly predictable. This is not the case with the Year of Lies (also known as the Ephemeral Year). During this year, everyone believes something untrue. However, the nature of this untruth differs from person to person. It also may (or may not) differ from Ephemeral Year to Ephemeral Year. Thus, someone might incorrectly believe he is a master swordsman this Year of Lies; then, in 12 years, he may believe he is a master swordsman again, or he may believe that leather armor is poisonous.

The Year of Lies is a period for unscrupulous individuals to take advantage of delusions. Because this is so common, many communities have laws that take effect specifically during the Ephemeral Year. For example, some require all purchases and contracts to be witnessed by one watcher per side of the transaction (or two impartial observers); that way, in theory, a voice of reason can step in to make sure that no one is swindled.

Game Effects

During the Year of Lies, everyone has a Minor Delusion [-5]. These can either add onto any existing Delusions or stack with one Delusion to increase its value. For example, someone with an existing Minor Delusion of "I am a master swordsman" may find it replaced with the Major Delusion "I am a master swordsman, and I must prove it by challenging everyone who I see holding a sword."

It's up to the GM to determine whether an individual's Delusion carries over between Duodecennia.

The Year of Death

Also known as the Reaper's Year, the Year of Death is a time of great trepidation and sorrow for many people. During this period, seemingly survivable wounds cause their victims to die, and deaths rise sharply from heart attacks and other maladies of the body.

Given how much closer the reaper's touch is during this year, many communities take extra precautions to protect each other from themselves. For example, they may forbid public duels or increase the penalties of death due to carelessness.

Game Effects

During the Reaper's Year, everyone has Easy to Kill 5 [-10]. This is cumulative with any existing levels of Easy to Kill, although the usual thresholds apply (p. B134) with no further penalties. If someone has Hard to Kill, the Year of Death's levels of Easy to Kill negate those first.

Snubbing the Fates

Some players may want to use bonus character points to simply buy off the disadvantages presented during the Sexennium Malum. In a campaign with enough character-point rewards, the GM may want to discourage or even forbid this.

If the GM wants to allow it, he can mitigate it slightly by making the negation of such disadvantages applicable only during a Duodecennium. In other words, if a PC buys off a disadvantage today, he will reacquire it in 12 years, when the cycle renews.

This doesn't apply to advantages that counteract the Malum disadvantages. However, the GM would be well within his rights to *double* the cost of any advantages purchased during that period, or even forbid it until the year in question is over; if the universe wants its residents to be fearful for a year, they will be fearful!

The Year of Fear

Also known as the Time of Terror, the Year of Fear is a period of timidity and general nervousness. The dangers of the world seem much more real, and death feels as if it lurks around every corner.

This year is especially challenging since it follows the Reaper's Year. Those who feel they escaped their demise legitimately may still feel that presence of the scythe . . . or any other lurking terrors.

Game Effects

The Year of Fear bestows Fearfulness 5 [-10]. This is cumulative with any existing levels of Fearfulness, although the usual thresholds apply (p. B136) with no further penalties. If someone has Fearlessness, the Year of Fear's levels of Fearfulness negate those first.

Fright Checks are also more common during the Time of Terror, incurred on even relatively minor situations (the sight of rats, the howling of wind) that might not warrant a roll during the rest of the Duodecennium.

THE YEAR OF FAMINE

Also called the Gluttonous Year, the Year of Famine is perhaps the most dangerous period. For reasons known only to the gods, people require more to eat during this year. Food grown, harvested, and consumed during this period is less satisfying and nourishing than comestibles from the rest of the Duodecennium. Whether it's a change in people or the world's food is unknown, but the effects are the same: People need to eat a *lot* more.

As a result, the Year of Famine is a fearful time. If a town was barely able to support itself with its crops in the Time of Terror, it will only be able to feed half the populace come the Year of Famine. Most municipalities prepare for this period by stockpiling food (although even stored food seems less nourishing and satisfying than if it were eaten fresh). Crimes involving food are especially common and – depending on the rest of the area's situation – dealt with harshly.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, revolution is common in the Year of Famine. The name of the "Gluttonous Year" is often invoked by hungry peasants who would overthrow a wealthy government.

Game Effects

During the Year of Famine, everyone has Increased Consumption 1 [-10], although the disadvantage is flexible in how it is satisfied – victims can eat six full meals a day, consume doubly large meals in lieu of normal-sized ones, or any other strategy that results in the same mass being eaten. Again, people aren't necessarily feeling the urge to eat twice as much; rather, the world seems to thwart their efforts at nourishment.

Those who already have Increased Consumption find it increased by one level during the Gluttonous Year. Those with Reduced Consumption find one level of it cancelled during this year.

THE YEAR OF MISFORTUNE

As despised as the Year of Luck is beloved, the Year of Misfortune inflicts its misery on all. During this time, things just seem to go *wrong*. Unlike the Year of Luck, the effects of the Year of Misfortune don't seem to cancel each other out in interpersonal relationships; perhaps this is because there are so many ways for things to go *wrong* in any interaction.

This year is also referred to as the Time of Flummoxed Fertility; those who desire more children seem to find themselves childless, while those who least desire children often find themselves as parents – sometimes of twins.

Game Effects

During the Year of Misfortune, everyone has Unluckiness [-10]. In general this manifests as slightly less malicious than p. B160 implies . . . but only slightly. The Year of Misfortune is a mostly serious string of slight calamities suffered by everyone in the world.

Those who have Unluckiness already discover it stacks during the Year of Misfortune; the GM can inflict its effects *twice* per session.

THE YEAR OF NIGHTMARE

Coming as it does three years from the Year of Fear (half the Sexennium), the Year of Nightmare serves as a coda to the Sexennium Malum and a segue into the Year of Spirit. During this time, bad dreams reign supreme, resulting in poor sleep and jittery mental states.

Since everyone suffers from nightmares during this year, society tends to work around it. Workdays are shortened and/or interrupted to allow for longer sleep periods and naps (to the extent it's possible – farmers are often on a tight timetable).

Game Effects

As the name implies, during the Year of Nightmare, everyone suffers from Nightmares (12) [-5]. Those who already have Nightmares find its penalties for sleeplessness doubled during this year (costing 2 FP; -2 to all skill and Perception rolls on a 17 or 18 on the self-control roll).

There seems to be a kind of order in the universe, in the movement of the stars and the turning of the earth and the changing of the seasons, and even in the cycle of human life. But human life itself is almost pure chaos. Everyone takes his stance, asserts his own rights and feelings, mistaking the motives of others, and his own.

– Katherine Anne Porter

THE DUODECENNIUM IN THE CAMPAIGN

The Duodecennium aims to add some the epic feel of an extended fantasy calendar to any campaign: "Behold, the Year of Spirits is upon us again!" Even similar adventure premises can vary considerably from year to year; a simple escort mission is very different in the Year of Safety compared to the same scenario in the Year of Lies. In addition, long-running campaigns can see how the world ebbs and flows around the various obstacles the Duodecennium presents.

There are also a number of other options that can be used with the Duodecennium.

THE COUNTERCYCLE

The Duodecennium presumes that all sapient life forms suffer the same effects at the same time. However, this need not be the case. For example, the surface world and the subterranean races may be six years out of sync; while the dayball dwellers live through the Sexennium Bonum, those below are in the Sexennium Malum (and vice versa).

DIFFERENT TIME

The Duodecennium is designed arbitrarily around the idea of 12 year-long units. There's nothing requiring the length of each unit to be a year, and making it shorter or longer can radically alter the campaign.

The Zodiac

Instead of a 12-year cycle, this system can easily map to a *12-month* cycle. Assuming an Earth-like climate, the mapping will need to be done carefully (since weather can have an effect on what is and isn't possible in a month). One possibility – based on an Earth-like northern hemisphere – is shown in the following table.

Month	Theme	Month	Theme
January	Acuity	July	Death
February	Acumen	August	Fear
March	Holding	September	Famine
April	Fortune	October	Misfortune
May	Safety	November	Nightmare
June	Lies	December	Spirit

The Day Is Long

For truly madcap campaigns, this cycle could repeat every *day!* In this case, the GM determines the effect of having some of these advantages or disadvantages for a few hours, or to replace those abilities with something more appropriate.

One suggested possibility in this regard is shown in the following table.

Time	Theme	Time	Theme
3 a.m.-5 a.m.	Sprit	3 p.m.-5 p.m.	Lies
5 a.m.-7 a.m.	Acuity	5 p.m.-7 p.m.	Death
7 a.m.-9 a.m.	Acumen	7 p.m.-9 p.m.	Fear
9 a.m.-11 a.m.	Holding	9 p.m.-11 p.m.	Famine
11 a.m.-1 p.m.	Fortune	11 p.m.-1 a.m.	Misfortune
1 p.m.-3 p.m.	Safety	1 a.m.-3 a.m.	Nightmare

THE CYCLE BEGINS

Add the Duodecennium to an existing fantasy campaign by having some cosmic calamity spill onto the world, and its effects have altered the fabric of time itself.

In this case, the GM can play with introducing the new abilities, letting the heroes become accustomed to their wiles before replacing them with a new advantage. Of course, eventually all those delicious free advantages need to give way to disadvantages . . .

The Universal Problem

One way for the GM to have fun with this idea is to envision what, exactly, would happen if these abilities were introduced universally. For example, if everyone suddenly had Luck for the next month, and they *knew* they had Luck, what would the effect on the world be? Or if the evil empire knew that everyone would start consuming more food in two months, how would it turn that knowledge to its advantage . . . and how would the rest of the world stop it?

These ideas and the tension they cause can add a suitably epic feel to a campaign. If all civil war happens in the Time of Famine, then the world will come to view that period with uncertainty.

Similarly, elements from a world's history (even if randomly generated – see pp. 4-8) can be projected onto the Duodecennial system. A great event has happened in the past; what boon or bane is associated with that event?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor who lives outside of Indianapolis, Indiana, with his wife and son. For more details about him, see his *Random Thought Table* on pp. 35-36.

Special thanks to Fade Manley who helped keep me from embarrassing myself with Latin.

SPIRITS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

BY ALAN LEDDON

To the people of a fantasy world with magic, it is only natural to seek protection from or control over undead and other supernatural entities and forces. For those who are not powerful sorcerers, the wise approach is to propitiate the spirits and then make requests of them. Everyone likes presents and flattery, so offering these things to a spirit might make it take your requests more seriously. Plus, if you have paid your chosen spirits well, they may warn or protect you when other supernatural beings come around. Finally, if you are giving a spirit the things it needs to survive in its world, it has more time to look after your needs, since its own needs have been cared for. Of course, some things, like unintelligent undead, cannot be propitiated or reasoned with, so other measures must be taken.

The rules in this article are best incorporated into a world or campaign at its beginning, or when the heroes enter a different culture. This creates a unique flavor for the campaign or in that specific culture.

> *Under those rules, a sacrifice is made to gain a specific benefit, at the time when the benefit is needed.*
>
> *– GURPS Thaumatology: Urban Magics*

SPIRITS AND OFFERINGS

When assessing whether spirits respond favorably to sacrifices, the GM should consider the amount of Wealth expended in offerings. Typically, for each 2% of the character's (PC or NPC) starting Wealth devoted to offerings *per year*, the spirit will react at +1 to requests from that person (*Reaction from NPCs*, p. B494). Of course, the GM need not make a reaction roll for unseen spirits. The benefits of making the sacrifices can simply be applied (or not), leaving everyone to wonder whether the sacrifices have an effect.

Not all spirits need to have **GURPS** stats to have an effect in play. Unseen spirits acting from a realm that cannot be reached can still affect the lives of characters in a fantasy world for better or for worse. It isn't necessary to quantify the powers of unseen spirits, either; simply decide on a range of subtle things they can do, and use them as needed to fit the story and campaign. Just be consistent, and players will be none the wiser.

APOTROPIACS

Apotropiacs are magical or superstitious methods to avoid evil influences and to protect against evil spirits and undead. Quite a number of these practices have been used in the real world, and should work equally well (or better) in a fantasy world.

- A heavy monument or marker placed over a buried coffin may prevent a corpse (vampire or zombie, for example) from rising by literally holding the creature in place.
- A person who might rise as a zombie or other unintelligent undead might be buried face down. When he starts digging his way out, he will dig toward the center of the world, rather than toward the surface of the cemetery.
- Before burial, a surgeon or butcher might cut the tendons and ligaments in the corpse's knees and elbows. This will slow the corpse's digging, and prevent it from walking or crawling if it still manages to free itself.
- Certain plants repel the undead. Garlic is said to ward off vampires, and aloe vera is hung in homes in some parts of South America to keep incorporeal spirits out. The GM might make Will rolls for undead or evil spirits to enter a home protected by the correct plants in his world. Clever townsfolk (or PCs) might plant this vegetation around cemeteries, requiring the same roll for the undead to leave the cemetery in the first place. Devious PCs might place these plants in such a way that the monsters find the path of least resistance goes to the home of an enemy of the PCs.

● Classical Greeks and Romans drank from cups decorated with images intended to scare evil spirits away. This prevented evil spirits from entering through the mouth during meals in order to possess the diner. This same idea could occur in any culture, including Fantasy cultures where evil spirits are real and are afraid of certain mythological figures or spirit wards.

BENEFIT PLANS FOR GHOSTS AND SPIRITS

"Tutelary spirits" are spirits of any kind that offer protection to people or places. Typically, people who are aware of a local tutelary spirit will want it to hang around. People who believe that there is no local tutelary spirit will likely want to attract one or more. The easiest way to attract and keep such spirits is with offerings.

In a world where people desire to attract and keep such spirits, they provide altars for the veneration of these spirits. These need not be elaborate affairs; the *butsudan* and *kamidan* of Japanese practice and the *lararium* of classical Rome are simple shelves or cabinets kept in the home. Each has an image representing the spirit(s) to be venerated and a few related items like censers and written prayers. These could be dedicated to ancestors who are expected to provide guidance and protection, fairies or other unseen folk, or even gods such as a goddess of the hearth or a deity who protects families or homes. An adventurer or a fantasy family might offer a plate of food at their kitchen shrine with each meal, burying it at the edge of their home, or placing the food outside at night for animals to consume. The shrine may have a special cup to receive daily gifts of wine, milk, or honey, or special incense must be burned daily. When PCs (or their Allies and Dependents) do this devotedly, the GM may permit +1 to rolls to resist bad luck while in the house, and +1 to resist spells cast by undead or evil spirits while in the house. If the PCs or the inhabitants of the house are particularly pious, perhaps the venerated spirit will cast a ward or other spell to help in a particularly difficult battle against evil.

Some spirits are thought to protect crops and livestock. The Alux (pronounced "aloosh"; pl. "Aluxob") of Mayan mythology and the Haltia of Finnish mythology are such spirits. Should the PCs or the townsfolk keep altars in the barn or the edge of the field, and make a daily offering of oil, incense, or grain, the GM might permit +1 to resist spells or poisons while in those places. Or, the benefits of these offerings might appear when neighboring fields are burned or blighted, but the majority of the protected field is unharmed.

Joss paper is another possibility in a new campaign, or in a distinctive culture in an ongoing game. Joss paper comes originally from China, and is made specifically for the purpose of being burned as offerings. It can take the form of pretty much anything – money, tools, toys, weapons, vehicles, etc. The belief is that, when the joss-paper item is dedicated to a specific deceased person or spirit, then burned, the spirit receives a "real" item of that sort. A papier-mâché mansion, dedicated to a deceased relative and burned, becomes a real mansion in the afterlife for the lucky recipient. Joss-paper banknotes are available inexpensively in packs of hundreds of notes, usually in outrageous denominations of $10,000 to $5 billion. Joss paper in the form of food can also be found. A good general rule is that 2% of the character's starting Wealth spent on joss paper and delivered to a spirit will make that spirit deliriously happy. The GM may permit a grateful recipient to occasionally return from the afterlife with the stats that he had in life, to either warn the pious characters of danger, to offer a clue to an upcoming puzzle, or to fight beside him. Alternately, an injured or ill adventurer or Dependent might make a mysterious recovery in spite of bad dice rolls.

CAN'T SHAKE THE COUGH

Virtually every culture has some sort of funeral practice. Forty thousand years ago, Neanderthals put flowers in graves. The classical Greeks placed coins in the mouths of their dead to ensure a swift passage over the Rivers Styx and Acheron – otherwise, there would be a wandering ghost with time on his hands and anger at his family. The classical Egyptians are famed for their elaborate funerary practices. The most primitive culture remaining on Earth, the Yamano Indians of the Amazon River Basin, eat their dead relatives "to keep them with us always."

Funerals come with their own set of social mores. People are expected to dress in a certain way when attending funerals, to behave with a certain degree of decorum, to avoid taboo remarks and behaviors, etc. The funeral follows a set pattern. Naturally, the specifics vary by culture and time, but the realities do not.

Why the formality? Many cultures believe that, if a funeral is not done properly, the deceased cannot rest easily. Some cultures believe that a ghost whose funeral was botched will seek revenge by causing "ghost sickness." Perhaps the ghost must wander for a period of time, maybe it is in pain, or perhaps a failed funeral denies it entrance to the spirit world. Or, if certain parts of the funeral are left out, the ghost is unable to eat or drink in the spirit world, or cannot receive offerings.

To rest in peace and never die again
And to be with long gone friends
The ghosts of those who lived here in the past
They will use the flames to leave this evil house

– King Diamond, "Spirits"

Japanese Ghost Sickness: A kind of ghost that is created when a person dies in an especially frightening way, and then has a funeral that is improperly done, spreads a disease that includes back pain, chills, headache, fever, loss of appetite, and nausea. This can be cured only by scaring off the ghost by recreating the events of its death. Everyone who spends time in the vicinity of the ghost, until it is driven off, has -2 to mental skill rolls and -3 to physical skill rolls. Additionally, they feel the effects of not eating (*Starvation and Dehydration*, p. B426).

Navajo Ghost Sickness: When someone did not receive the proper burial rites, that person's ghost inflicted discomfort on the living. The ghost sickness included feeling tired, having a fever, and violently nauseous. It could only be cured by providing a proper burial for the ghost's former body. Those who spend time in the vicinity of the ghost, until it is laid to rest, experience -1 to mental skill rolls and -2 to physical skill rolls. Also, they must endure the effects of not eating (*Starvation and Dehydration*, p. B426).

Polynesian Ghost Sickness: People who are cursed by a ghost who did not receive the correct funeral will heal slowly from injuries. This can only be undone by providing a proper funeral to the ghost. For anyone in the ghost's vicinity, until a proper funeral is provided, *triple* the time between rolls to recover lost hit points (*Natural Recovery*, p. B424).

Improper Funerals

What makes a funeral improper? First, consider at the behavior of the guests. Are all dressed appropriately? At a modern American funeral, a woman in a low-cut red dress or a man dressed in a loud Hawaiian shirt may be enough to botch it; everyone is supposed to be in black or other somber colors.

Did everyone behave properly? If the widow picks a fight with another attendee, the spirit may be too embarrassed or too angry to move on.

Were all the steps followed? Did the priest read the right passages from the Book of the Dead? Did the shaman call upon *all* of the psychopomps in the culture? Did the ritual meal fall after the eulogy and before the ritual of denying sins, as it is supposed to?

Finally, if the GM can find no fault with the ritual, he can roll against Religious Ritual (at +2 for a priest of a death or psychopomp figure) to ensure that the funeral worked properly. If this roll is failed, or something went wrong during the funeral, the community can (and should) expect an angry ghost to appear within a month. Whether one does, it appears that one does, or nothing happens is entirely the choice of the GM. Of course, in cultures where ghosts are disbelieved, the community should not expect the ghost . . . and may have no explanation when one starts spreading disease.

Dead Can Eat

Some cultures, particularly in East Asia, have notions of hungry dead. The Japanese saw them as selfish people undergoing a horrible punishment. The Chinese viewed them as ancestors naturally getting hungry, and so provided a feast (of real food, left outside) for the Hungry Ghosts on or around April 17 of every year. Taoism, however, teaches that if people are buried with inadequate provisions to survive in the afterlife, they will come back looking for more food . . . and you are it!

If a GM adopts this type of hungry ghost, then a funeral is considered botched if the grave goods include food and beverages with a total value of less than 10% of the *deceased's* starting Wealth. A ghost sickness then comes over the family of the deceased, and any business associates or employees who did not contribute to his larder. "Business" can include adventuring! The ghost sickness may manifest as any of the types described in *Can't Shake the Cough* (above), or a simple inability to recover FP. This can be resolved by adding enough food to the deceased larder to correct the shortage.

Adventure Seeds

Arriving Home: The adventurers arrive come for the first time in some years, just in time for a major festival. However, some of their deceased fellow townsmen have been getting up and walking around, much to the dismay of the PCs' families. The town calls on the "experienced heroes" to put an end to this nightmare – and to do it before the upcoming holiday!

Cold Revenge: A long-time friend of one of the PCs has passed away. When the person arrives to pay his respects, he is told by friends and family that several strangers interrupted the funeral at different points, and now there are signs that his friend is not resting easily. Another member of the group stumbles on the fact that two of the people who interrupted the funeral are employees of a former lover of the deceased.

Feeding the Dead: The PCs enter a town shortly after the funeral for a local noble. He was fantastically rich, mostly in land, art, and gold. However, the people are afraid; the noble's family have grown listless and weak, as have the bankers, landlords, and soldiers. The people have little more food for their families. Could the heroes exorcise the ghost or help find enough food to be buried with him that he'll stop eating the soldiers who protect the town?

Maybe this is a haunting. Pissed-off spirits with some unfinished business?

– Dean Winchester,
Supernatural *#1.8*

About the Author

Alan Leddon lives in Madison, Wisconsin, with his wife, Bekki (who is a gamer); and his daughter, Raven (who wants to be a gamer). His home is also inhabited by a beagle basset mix (not a gamer) and a Maine Coon cat mix (also not a gamer). There are bats in the attic (also not gamers) and an unfortunate number of neighbors (who don't play RPGs, either). The nearby community garden is inhabited by rabbits (who don't game), large black birds (who don't game), and, evidently, one or more foxes (who probably eat the rabbits, but likely do not roleplay).

Random Thought Table

The World-Building of Rules

by Steven Marsh, *Pyramid* Editor

The earliest roleplaying game title I can remember that made me really think about fantasy world-building is *Fate of Istus*. Released in 1989, this adventure for the *World of Greyhawk* setting is an odd duck in the *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons* pantheon. It was designed as an epic mega-adventure to transition players from the First Edition of *AD&D* to the Second Edition.

This would be fairly standard stuff in most instances. However, this adventure was particularly interesting because it attempted to justify the changes in the rules by implementing those changes in the game world. For example, assassins were no longer a core character class in Second Edition, so the gods did some hummina-hummina that made them for-get their assassinly abilities. Similarly (as I recall), all the monks decided to head out of Greyhawk for parts unknown, since there weren't monks in Second Edition.

This adventure was fairly ill-received at the time of its release, and looking back on it with the jaded eyes of an adult I can understand some of the backlash . . . especially with the view that TSR was making arbitrary decisions to modify "my" campaign via their adventure. However, having read it as a 15-year-old, my mind was blown at the possibilities. In particular, I loved the idea of looking at changes in the game world through the lens of changes to the rules.

So how did that idea come to affect my outlook?

A Change of Capes

The first time I got a chance to use this was when I switched over the campaign world from *GURPS Supers* to *Champions.* This was coupled with a change of a couple players as well, so it wasn't as traumatic as those familiar with both games might think.

Still, I tried to come up with a reason to justify why the world felt stranger than it had before. I decided to go with a low-key approach. To better suit the more methodical, tactical feel of *Champions,* the new super-team had a more militaristic, strike-force mentality than the previous group of PCs. I set up the new team in an entirely new city, away from the previous roster of heroes and villains. My intention had always been to re-introduce previous personalities as needed, sparing me from having to do a mass batch of *GURPS*-to-*Champions* translations. Besides, time is the great equalizer in implementing rule changes in the game world; the longer the gulf between when the rule revisions were and when they become important again, the easier it is to explain things away. ("Say, Flame Gal! It seems your powers are radically different than when I last saw you 11 years ago. How do you explain that?" "Well, let's begin with the fact that it's been 11 years . . .")

The rebooted campaign didn't last long enough for it to be a concern, but the supers genre is one that's forgiving of world-changing events . . . much like most fantasy settings.
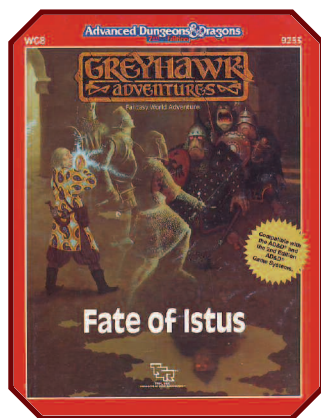
Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Ch-Changes

Other games have incorporated rule changes into their settings. Outside of the various flavors of *Dungeons & Dragons* – especially the game worlds (*Ravenloft* rebooted a few different times) – probably the biggest system with setting-affecting changes occurred with the various alterations of the *World of Darkness* rules. Prior to the new *World of Darkness* reboot in 2004, each revision of the rules of the various sublines (especially *Vampire: The Masquerade, Werewolf: The Apocalypse,* and *Mage: The Ascension*) resulted in significant changes to the setting. Some places became more difficult to get to, some groups were wiped out or replaced, and – in one of the worlds – the protagonists "lost" the overarching plot and found themselves picking up the pieces in the game world.

However, not all applications of rules affecting the game world need to stem from an edition change. In fact, one example is in this very issue (which was one inspiration for my column this month).

The Rules Rule

With *The Duodecennial Deviations* (pp. 27-31), I whipped up a fantasy calendar cycle that postulates the effect that universal game-rule benefits would have on the game world. When writing it, I kept asking myself, "How would the game world be affected if everyone suddenly had Luck? Or Longevity for one year only?"

By starting with a rule and working backward, I came up with some ideas that hadn't occurred to me before. (How would society differ if everyone had Danger Sense? Would people take more chances? Would an enemy use overwhelming force to thwart that precognitive sense?)

It should be noted that this thought isn't an entirely artificial construct; our lives don't revolve around game rulebooks, but they *are* greatly characterized by the laws of society and nature that hold sway over us. For example, here in the United States, our ingrained freedom of speech has resulted in a populace that is particularly proud of its ability to say what it wants – and it's also arguably a contributing factor to the cynicism held by many (since if anyone can say anything, then much of it will be untrue or require questioning). Similarly, Americans' rights to bear arms have resulted in a *very* different nation from those where guns are controlled or outlawed.

In the natural world, many "laws" are similarly immutable, which influence the human experience and shape the world. For example, an expectant mother requires nine months to bring her child into this world; this can't be sped up safely (unless you're a project manager, in which case you can hire eight more women to reduce the effort to one month apiece). The immutable physiological changes means that – for example – physical activities are more challenging for women in the third trimester. This has resulted in logistic issues (don't plan huge road trips with a nine-month-pregnant woman) and social repercussions (such as maternity leave and comfort concessions to expectant mothers).

The Big Fantasy Picture

Stepping back into the game world, then, it's interesting to look at the rules and understand what they mean for the fantasy setting – especially in anything approaching a realistic world. (There's no sense in trying to extrapolate rules in a **Dungeon Fantasy** world; the logistics of a "loot ancient dungeons and take their stuff" economy fall apart almost immediately.)

Let's come up with one new rule for the **GURPS** game and see where it leads us in our fantasy setting. Let's say the GM is looking for a suitably epic campaign, and he gives all participants the chance to use unspent character points to modify dice rolls, at the cost of 1 point per shift on a roll. For example, if a player rolled a 7 and he needed a 5 to succeed, he could burn 2 unspent character points to nudge it. Similar to Luck, rolls can only be modified if they directly affect the point-spender, and the roll desired needs to be physically possible. Thus, if you got a 7 on a skill roll, you couldn't spend 5 points to nudge it to a 2, since that's an impossible result on 3d.

Rock (and Roll) of Ages

Now the GM gets to envision how this affects the world. One of the more interesting outcomes is realizing how it intersects with the *Age and Aging* rules (p. B444). If the GM allows this new rule to modify aging rolls, then that means those heroes with sufficient point reserves can be assured of being successful in those rolls. Of course, the question arises of who tends to have such point reserves . . . and the answer is (generally) really active and/or *interesting* characters. This gives rise to the possibility of a new avenue on a fantasy trope: ancient, powerful *adventurers*. Presuming for a moment that other forms of longevity are unavailable, this means that there will be a swath of active aged heroes (and villains); they have to continue performing great deeds, to earn the character points to keep them alive! This is a different take on a classic trope; most elderly powerful personas are sages and wizards wiling away the years in their towers. However, since the industrious adventurers need to spend their bonus points on passing those aging rolls, that likely means they will remain relatively flat in their power. Such a group would be incredibly useful from a game-world-design standpoint; they'd be a ready-made cavalry, able (and eager!) to swoop in and save errant callow heroes who got in over their heads. (If the GM felt it was necessary, these active elderly could be hand-waved away by noting that adventuring keeps them young.)

Again, extrapolating one rule into the implications on the game world opens up new possibilities; I leave it as an exercise to the reader to determine other ways the "spend points to modify rolls" rule would affect a fantasy world. As one avenue of thought: Magical creations and rituals would likely be much more commonplace. I imagine cultists and other ne'er-do-wells could create some *very* interesting effects . . . which opens up more world-building possibilities.

To Rule Them All

Many GMs try to build a fantasy world by envisioning what they want for the setting, then mold the rules to fit that desire. However, turning that notion around – by starting with rules changes and seeing how it shapes the world – can create new and equally fascinating worlds.

There are no experimental failures. There's only more data!
– Bryce Lynch,
Max Headroom

About the Editor

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over 10 years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son.

ODDS AND ENDS

CANOPY CHARACTERS

by Jason Brick

Any campaign can take a side trek into the upper reaches of a canopy forest (see *In the Jungle,* pp. 18-20). For campaigns that center on this environment, some of the traditional fantasy-character builds are less useful.

Advantages well-suited for fantasy adventurers in a canopy forest campaign include Absolute Direction, Empathy, Brachiator, Catfall, Clinging, Night Vision, Perfect Balance, Plant Empathy, Resistant, Speak With Animals, Speak With Plants, and Walk on Air.

Some disadvantages are particularly troublesome in a canopy forest adventure. These include Bad Grip, Dread (of trees or similar forest fixtures), Frightens Animals, Lame, Lifebane, Night Blindness, No Legs, One Arm, One Hand, One Leg, Phobia (as for Dread), and Quadriplegic. Players should avoid them, or ask the GM to consider increasing their point value to reflect the greater hardship.

FOUR ADVANTAGES TO MODIFY A FANTASY WORLD

This month's *Random Thought Table* (pp. 35-36) looks at how the implantation of various rules can change the flavor of a fantasy world. Here are a few good choices for universal advantages (in the style of those bestowed by *The Duodecennial Deviations* – pp. 27-31).

● *Allies:* What if *everyone* acquired a familiar (p. B38) upon reaching puberty . . . which couldn't be replaced if it died? Society would obviously be more animal friendly, but there would probably be laws and customs centered around the creatures: to what extent their actions are legally binding, social attitudes if someone's familiar dies, etc.

● *Daredevil:* A universal applicability of Daredevil probably wouldn't affect the day-to-day world terribly much, since the small bonus it provides only slightly offsets the penalties that are likely incurred by taking unnecessary risks (although the critical-failure mitigation might be worthwhile). However, if the universal bonus of Daredevil were (say) +3 instead of +1, the world would be a very active, chaotic place; it would probably resemble an extreme pulp setting, where leaping out a window onto your horse is *safer* than using the front door!

● *Eidetic Memory:* If everyone in a society has this at the 10-point Photographic Memory level, the spread of information might be quite different. It's reasonable that books would

Murphy's Rules

BY GREG HYLAND

On a very special Earthdawn Dog Whisperer...

Lassie, I need you to fetch my hat...

WOOF!

...and fly me to the moon!

WOOF!

IN *EARTHDAWN* (FASA), THE *ANIMAL HANDLING* SKILL IS USED TO MAKE AN ANIMAL PERFORM AN ACTION BEYOND ITS NORMAL CAPABILITIES. IF THE SKILL USE SUCCEEDS, THE ANIMAL *"PERFORMS THE ACTION REQUESTED OF IT."*

Got a *Murphy's Rule* of your own? Send it to **murphy@sjgames.com**

be used more to transport knowledge rather than provide a repository for overflow lore. The legal system would also likely be different; eyewitnesses would be much more reliable, perjury would likely be dealt with incredibly harshly, and it would be impossible to "forget" a crucial piece of evidence.

● *Reawakened:* The ability to conjure up *any* skill desired (provided you have the character points to pay for them) would be a powerful and game-altering aspect in a fantasy setting. The further implications – that all souls alive are tapping into some set of previous lives – is especially fruitful for further adventuring possibilities . . .

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Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Up-to-date errata pages for all **GURPS** releases are available on our website – see above.

GURPS rules and statistics in this magazine are specifically for the **GURPS Basic Set,** *Fourth Edition.* Page references that begin with B refer to that book.