

SWORD & PLANET

A CAMPAIGN GUIDE



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Running Sword & Planet

The sword and planet genre seems to be in disfavor these days.

Perhaps the thought of human life on Mars or other far-flung planets is too fanciful for modern audiences. Perhaps the elements of pseudo-science just seem too far-fetched.

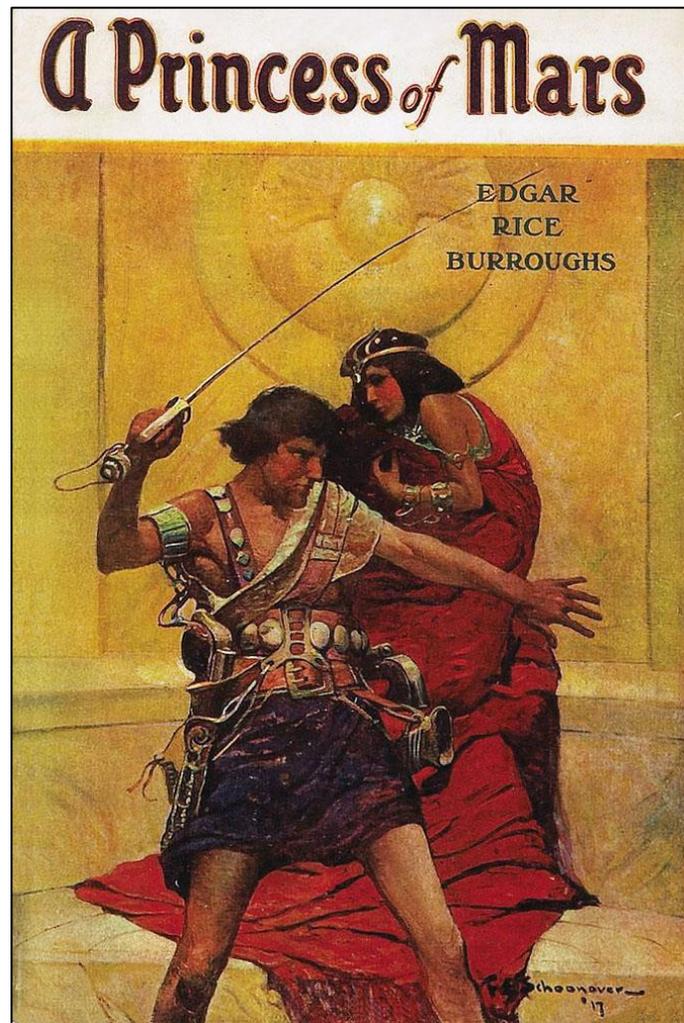
Perhaps swashbuckling moral heroes are out of fashion. Perhaps honor and duty are outmoded.

Sword and planet flourished in a different age. In the late 1800's and early 1900's, new discoveries were being made at a lightning pace. Everything and anything seemed possible.

Theories of Mars being inhabited were not only popular reading, they were scientifically accepted.

The dichotomy of advanced technology on primitive worlds or the combination of swords and ray guns may prove too much for some imaginations. However, the genre contains much material for role-playing game campaigns.

Adventure, treasure, strange locations, and epic battles, all hallmarks of sword and planet, practically beg to be in role-playing games.



If you are a fan of the genre or you are a game master looking for a change from conventional fantasy, sword and planet could be exactly what you are looking for.

I will break down elements of the genre and give you tips and ideas on how you can run a sword and planet campaign.

The Visitor

In sword and planet fiction, the earthman is essential. Having an earthling set in strange surroundings heightens the sense of wonder.

In the novels of Edgar Rice Burroughs and others, the earthman served as an audience surrogate. Someone the reader could identify with and experience the journey through their eyes.

When crafting a sword and planet campaign, at least one of the characters should be from earth. This character is the true fish out of water. Drama should flow from the simple fact that this character is in a new world.

The inhabitants of the world recognize strangeness in the visitor. Either the visitor from earth is racially different or is instantly recognized as a foreigner by his actions.



Rarely does the earthman strive to go back to earth. Usually, he is caught up in the swirling politics of the world. Adventure, love, honor, and friendship keeps him bound to the new world. If he finds himself back on earth, his thoughts are consumed by the events and people of the world.

Having the visitor be from the late 19th or early 20th centuries seems to work best. Obviously, those would have been contemporary times when sword and planet fiction was being produced. The situations and worlds lend themselves to a hero with the worldview of those eras.

Also, this will force your players into playing very complex characters. They are playing a character from a different time and world.

Takeaway: *One or more of your characters must be from early 20th century earth.*

Supermen

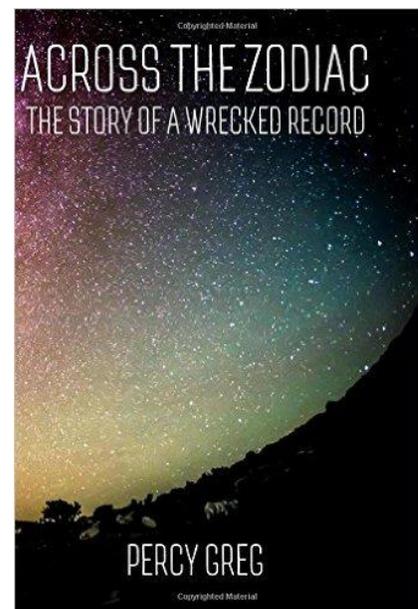
Contemporary fiction that involves travelers to other worlds tells us that the visitor should be an ordinary person. See any number of anime series with the “magic girl” character or movies with average Joes being swept up to other worlds.

However, in the sword and planet genre, the visitor from earth is usually the best of the best. In some cases, they are superhuman.

Hot-blooded, pounding hearts stirred to great deeds beat in these men’s chests. Sinews ripple in strong limbs as hands trained for war strive to conquer. Love, honor, respect, and duty are all calls to lay down one’s life.

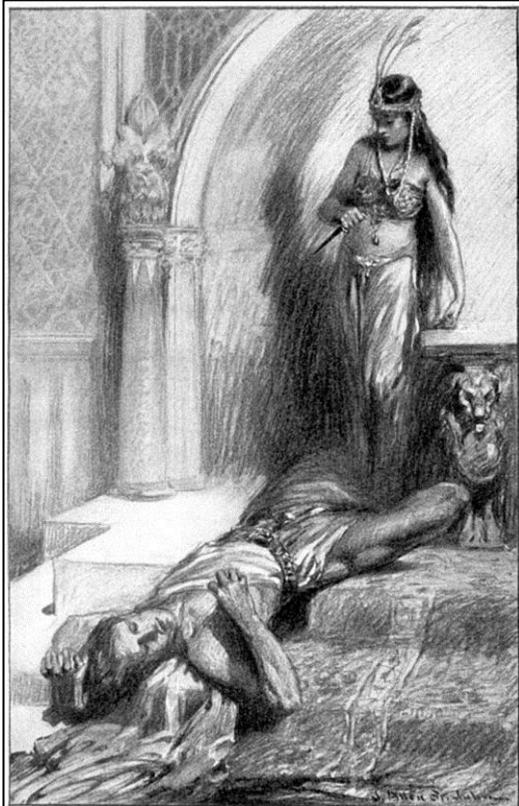
Edgar Rice Burroughs’ John Carter is a unique human to say the least. Long-lived and drawn to war, from earth, yet not a normal human, John Carter certainly is suited for his new life on Mars.

Leigh Brackett’s Eric John Stark is a mountain of manly muscle raised by a savage, ape-like tribe on Mercury. He’s an interplanetary gunrunner who now adventures on Mars.



[Across the Zodiac is believed to be the first sword and planet novel. It is available on Amazon in reprint by Dicegeeks.com](#)

When creating the visitor character, think things like these: the earth's greatest intellect, the best soldier, the leading scientist, the most phenomenal athlete, or the most learned scholar.



THE JEDDAK OF LOTHAR SANK SENSELESS TO THE MARBLE FLOOR. Page 126

Spicing them with a bit of the “other” would be perfect as well. The character has looked as if he were 25 years old for the past 30 years. Mysterious circumstances surround his birth. “Something in his blood” makes him faster, stronger, or smarter. A family story says his great grandfather was “not from around these parts,” or he told tall tales no one believed.

Takeaway: *The visitor is larger than life on earth as well as the new planet.*

Arrival

If there's a visitor to another world, how does he get there?

Spaceships work well for stories like Buck Rogers or Flash Gordon, but they break the ambience in sword and planet stories. Though, spaceships can work if the technology is fantastic. Sword and planet is more mysterious and mystical than science fiction.

Translocation or astral projection are the best options. Technological or supernatural means both work well in the genre.

Technological means of translocation suit the expedition or traveler backstory. If your earthman character purposefully travels to another planet, make the means of travel scientific.

Think about the means of translocation in terms of early 20th century science and fiction. Scientists discover a new substance. This substance allows for molecular transfusion through space. A temporal disturbance was discovered in a remote location. Applying electricity allows the opening of a portal.

The motif of “the call” is popular in sword and planet fiction as well. If you would like to incorporate “the call,” a supernatural translocation is fitting.

In this case, the visitor is not an intentional traveler. Something calls to him and brings him to this new world. He is to serve a purpose here in these wild lands. It is his destiny.



[Gulliver of Mars is an incredibly fun sword and planet romp. Is it available on Amazon in reprint by Dicegeeks.com](#)

Leave the means of translocation unexplained. However, use backstory to build mystery.

A certain star in the sky draws the character and has always fascinated him.

If the star is Sirius, then in the character’s backstory dogs have played an important role. Dogs have always especially loved him. A dog saved his life. Or as a child, he saved the life of an old dog.

Moments of trauma or pain are suitable for “the call” as well.

John lay in a pool of his own blood. The sniper’s aim could have been better, but it was an impressive shot nonetheless. John could feel every heartbeat like the tearing of thick cloth. The din of the battle roared softer and softer. How would they break the news to his mother? Why didn’t he tell his brother he loved him? Darkness. Then blinding light. A scorching sun and red sand. John grabbed his

chest. No wound was to be found. He didn't know where he was, but he had a feeling he was no longer in South Africa, and the Boer War would have to go on without him. Little did he know how far away from both he was...



The question of what happens to the visitor's body is answered in various ways.

Sometimes the translocation is complete. The earthman simply disappears and friends and family don't know what happened to him.

In other cases, the visitor's body remains on earth, yet he lives and breathes on another world. His helpless form is in a stasis of some kind needing neither food nor drink. The body is sometimes sealed in a crypt or other vault to be watched over by a friend or relative.

Takeaway: *Use translocation, not spaceships, as a means of travel to the new world.*

Humans

The earthman always meets at least one race that looks identical to humans, save perhaps for a distinguishing feature like skin color or hair color.

In many cases, there are a variety of human races. Burroughs populates his Mars with humans of white, black and red skin colors. Also, there exists a green skinned beast-like people plus an array of other strange beings.

The human element allows for the earthman to interact with beings that are at once familiar and strange. Also, it allows a love interest.

At the time, it was probably thought too wild to have a human and fantastical being fall in love. However, this seems to be only limited to body shape as the heroes of a number of sword and planet novels marry princesses of different skin colors.

Takeaway: *When creating your world, be sure to include human-like races.*

Princesses

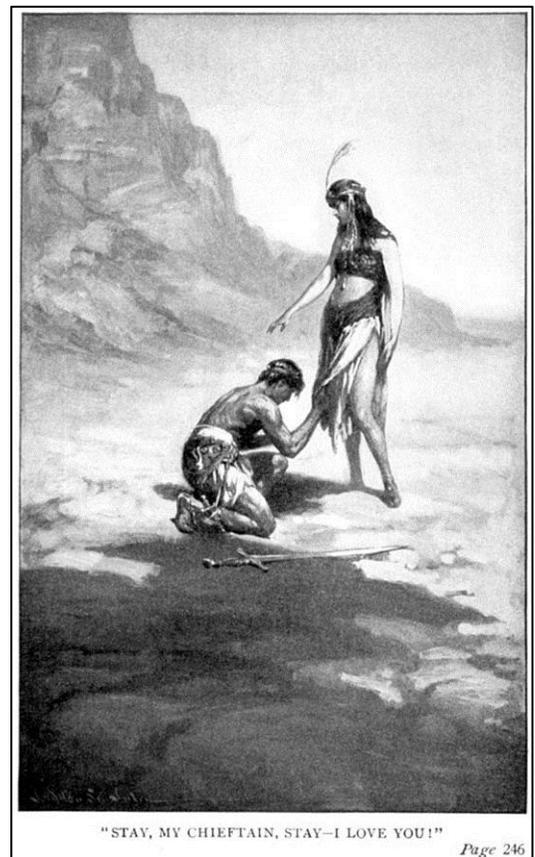
There is always a princess. To be clear, there is always a princess. And yes, the princess always falls in love with the hero from earth.

The princess's beauty is legendary. Her gossamer tresses fall about her face as gently as a spring breeze. Her gown touches her skin as lightly as a leaf riding a placid stream. It allows her womanly loveliness to shine forth brighter than the sun. Her eyes, her eyes! Whirling seas of passion and nobility. Their gaze reaches the very soul and speaks a language of which anyone who calls himself a man is fluent.

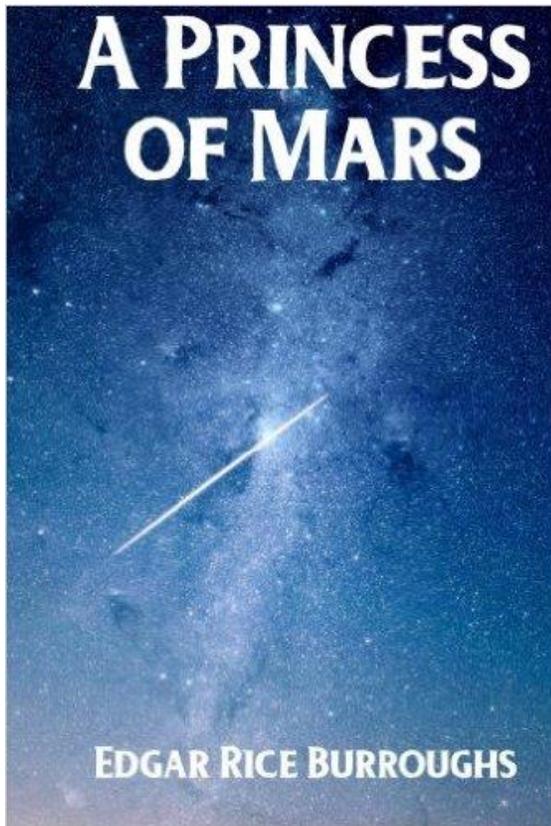
Let's be frank, sword and planet stories were written for a specific audience: young teenage boys.

Writers fed this audience something they were interested in, girls who happened to be drop-dead gorgeous, rich, and in need of rescue.

You can handle this in a variety of ways in your campaigns.



First, play the trope. Have the rescue of an NPC princess be central to your game. Have her fall in love with the earthman. For some groups, this will work great. For others, it will not, but it is still a viable option to role-play in certain circumstances.



[Edgar Rice Burroughs' classic work, A Princess of Mars, pushes the imagination to the limit. It is available on Amazon in reprint by Dicegeeks.com](#)

Second, allow the princess to be a player character. A rescue really wouldn't work in this case. However, allowing the princess to be a PC opens up many exiting angles. Players always have ways of surprising the game master. Let one of your players create the princess character, and you will not have to worry much about clichés and rehashed stories.

Third, look for a way to turn the trope on its head. Is the princess the real power player in the realm? Maybe the princess rescues the earthman. The danger the princess is in could be part of an elaborate plan she has been working to defeat her enemy, and the rescue puts her plans in jeopardy.

Takeaway: *There is always a princess, so use that to your advantage.*

Kidnappings

Kidnappings are central to the plots in many sword and planet stories. Either the hero is kidnapped or his friend or family member or the princess is kidnapped.

A danger of falling into clichés abounds with stories that surround kidnappings, but that's not a foregone conclusion.

Let's look at why kidnappings can be compelling story devices.

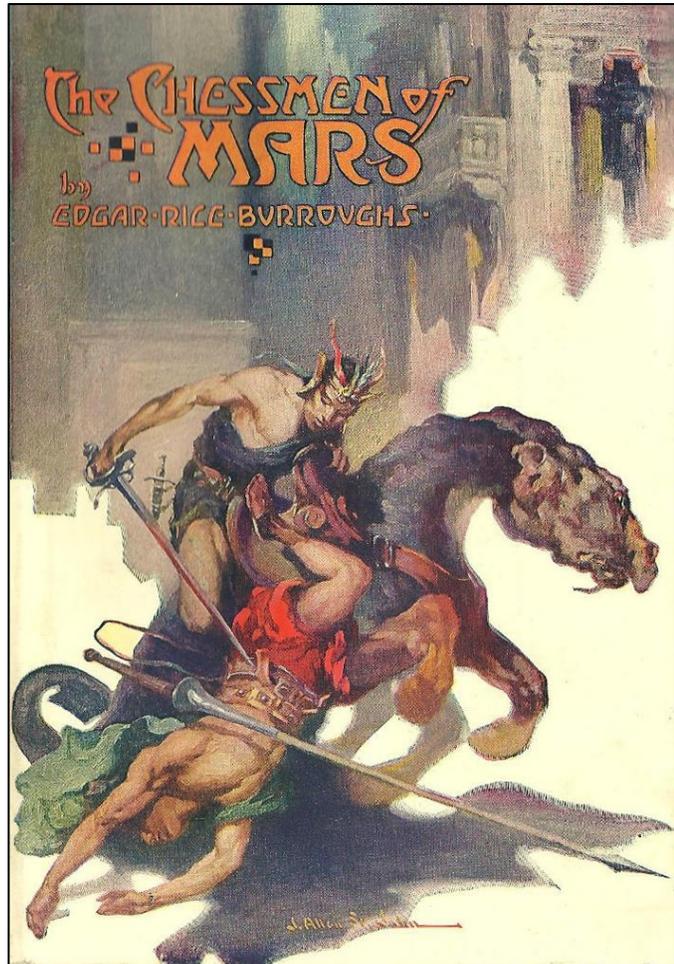
Since the individual is dear to the main character, drama flows naturally. And since the main character is a man or woman of action, there is no question a rescue attempt will be made.

A rescue attempt means travelling to new lands, exploring caves and dungeons, fighting villains, stark good and evil, and the revealing of sinister plans and plots.

Think about a kidnapping that would throw your character into instant drama and conflict.

The person kidnapped should already be loved by the characters in the party. This gives them a straightforward motive. This can be difficult to accomplish since at least one character is new to the world.

However, the solution is simple. Delay the kidnapping until the earthman character cares for the individual taken. Or if he is kidnapped, wait until he loves the kingdom he found himself in and therefore has to fight to get back to it.



A plot somewhat related to kidnapping is being lost. Sometimes the hero or the family member accidentally becomes lost. This has the effect of launching great searches or journeys home, fraught with danger of course.

Takeaway: Use a kidnapping to create adventure while preserving the flavor of sword and planet.

Racism

Yeah, I'm going there. Many novels from the late 1800's and the early 1900's are soaked in racism, and sword and planet novels are no exception.

Does that mean your RPG campaign has to be racist? Of course not.

There are many ways to handle this issue, but here are just a couple of ideas.

Simply don't include those attitudes or themes in your stories. In the context of a game played for recreation, this is perfectly legit.

Meet it head on. This can be tricky, but can lead to great stories. The earthman character can be racist or be discriminated against on earth. On the new world, he faces challenges related to either scenario as part of his character arc.



The racist character would have his attitudes challenged and learn to respect other races. The character who experienced racism on earth should be put in the position where he could discriminate based on race on the new world. He must overcome the temptation.

Whatever you choose, first discuss it with your players. Some may have very personal reasons for not wanting the subject in a game. Some may really want to play with heavy themes. Both are fine.

Takeaway: *If you use racism, always make sure it's part of the character's arc.*

Sexism

Yup, I'm going here too. Sexism was rampant in sword and planet. I touched on this a bit in the section about princesses.

Does this mean your campaign has to be sexist? No, absolutely not.

This can be handled similarly to racism.



Create your campaign with male and female in equal roles. This is a sound solution. Don't even delve into the problems with sword and planet fiction.

Again, you can meet this attitude head on. Use character arcs to reveal the wrongness of sexist attitudes.

Takeaway: *If you use sexism, always make sure it's part of the character's arc.*

The Strange

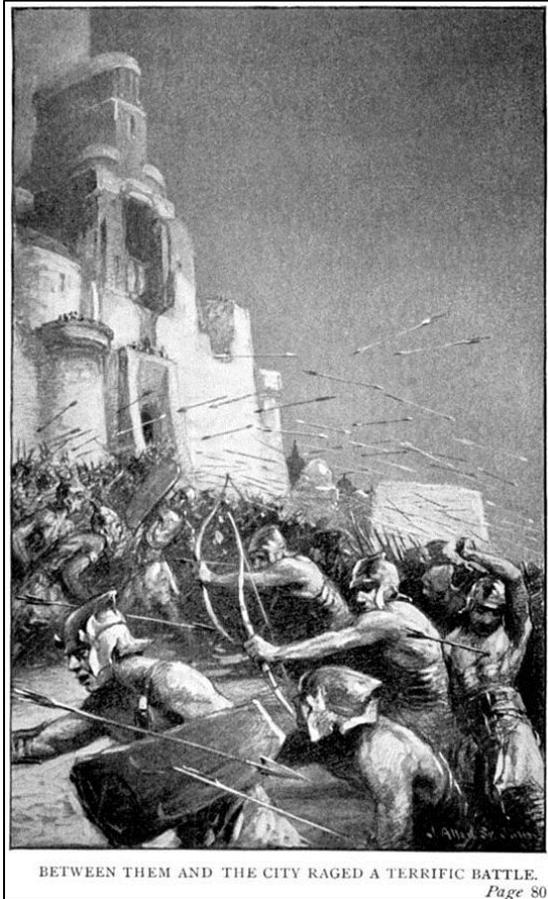
Sword and planet revels in the strange. Describing odd or bizarre habits in the different cultures of the new world is essential.

Below is a list of ideas to get you thinking.

Embalming and the Treatment of the Dead – Burroughs uses these with powerful effect. He was heavily influenced by H. Rider Haggard's portrayal of the treatment of the dead in his novel *She*. Another influence is certainly the burial rites of the Martians in Edwin L. Arnold's *Gulliver of Mars*.

However, ERB adds layers of strangeness and otherworldliness fitting his genius.

In *The Chessman of Mars*, the culture flawlessly embalms and publicly displays the dead. In *John Carter of Mars*, the embalming takes on a haunting element that is forever burned in my imagination. The embalming process can cause resurrection.



When creating a new culture, the treatment of the dead is a defining trait. Do not let this go untapped. If done well, this is something that can leave a lasting impression on your players.

Human Enslavement – Enslavement by other humanoids is certainly seen, however enslavement by aliens, beasts, machines, clones, or human creations is very common.

Think about how to give your campaign more flavor. If you are using the trope of a kidnapping, have the characters captured and enslaved by something strange. Semi-intelligent beasts and primitive tribes would work well. Flesh automatons that are the creations of an ancient dead culture may be better.

Missing Links and Giant Apes (sometimes with intelligence) – Lowland Gorillas were discovered in 1847. However, Mountain Gorillas were not discovered until 1902. Since these events would have been in the news during the formative years of sword and planet, it is easy to see the fascination.

Imagine semi-intelligent tribes of beasts living in the ruins of crumbling cities. Spears are the most advanced weaponry. The language is bestial yet able to convey some abstract concepts.

Yet on occasion, a tribe of apes or missing links possesses the same intelligence as humans. They can either invent or use advanced technology, like computers and

robotics. Whether products of evolution or scientific experiments, these are formidable beings. Such a being would make an excellent player character and companion of the earthling.

Mad Kings – Mighty monarchs wielding incredible power, yet they are thoroughly insane. Driven mad by power or science or isolation, these kings resort to ill-advised schemes. Kidnappings, suicidal wars, and forcing princesses to marry them or their heirs are all fair game.

Player characters should be caught up in these schemes. The king wants their abilities or their secrets. The king is trying to conquer the earthman's adopted city or country.

When preparing your campaign, search for ways to make the mad king's schemes exciting. The schemes should place player characters in danger. Whatever the mad king's scheme, it should be convoluted and seem nonsensical to a sane person.

Mazes, Labyrinths, and Towers – The hero or the kidnapped is often imprisoned in a maze, labyrinth, or a tower. Obviously, this trope leans itself to gaming quite well.

Using one of these is perfect for adding some dungeon crawl action to your campaign. Some players will enjoy this more than straight roleplaying. Of course, others will not. However, the variety will keep players engaged, even if dungeon crawling is not their favorite activity.

Sometimes mazes, labyrinths, or towers are discovered accidentally. Usually this would happen shortly after the earthling's arrival on the new world. The search for shelter or food forces the earthman to enter the structure. However, there are consequences.

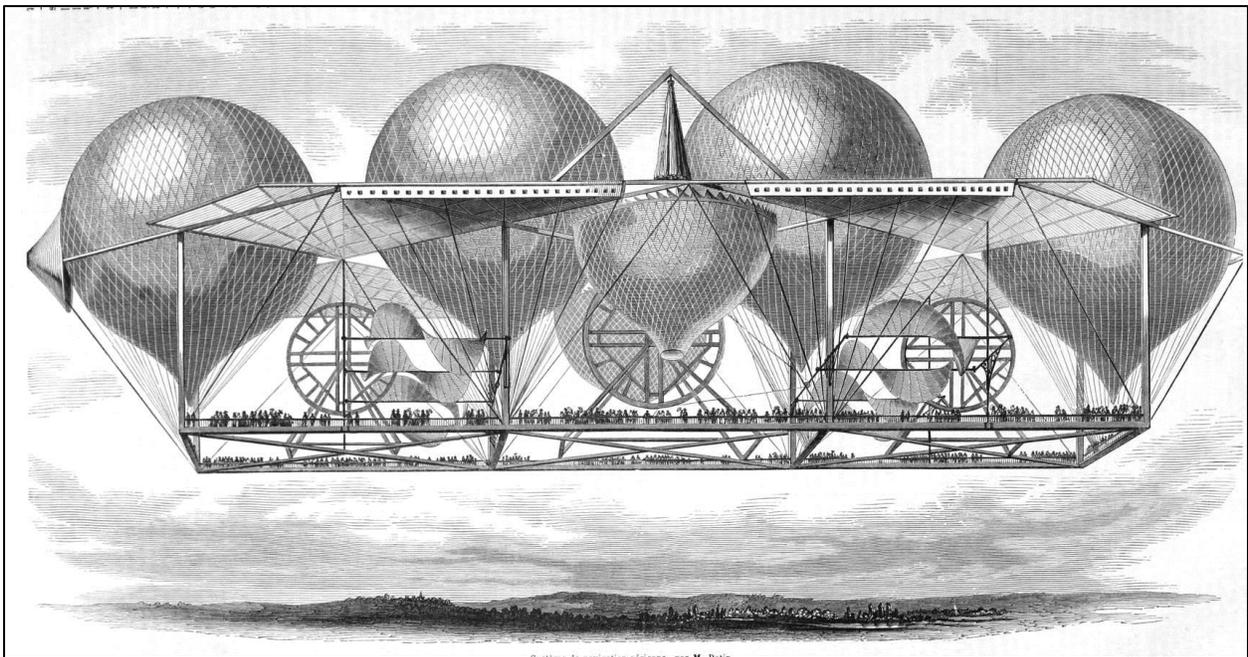


The structure is sacred, which causes the hero to unknowingly violate culture or tradition. He must redeem himself with some sort of quest or trial.

While searching the structure the hero finds someone who is falsely imprisoned. The person's story is the spark that pulls the hero into the politics and conflicts of the world.

The structure could be the villain's lair or lab. The possibilities are endless.

Takeaway: *Be sure to add an element of strangeness to your world.*

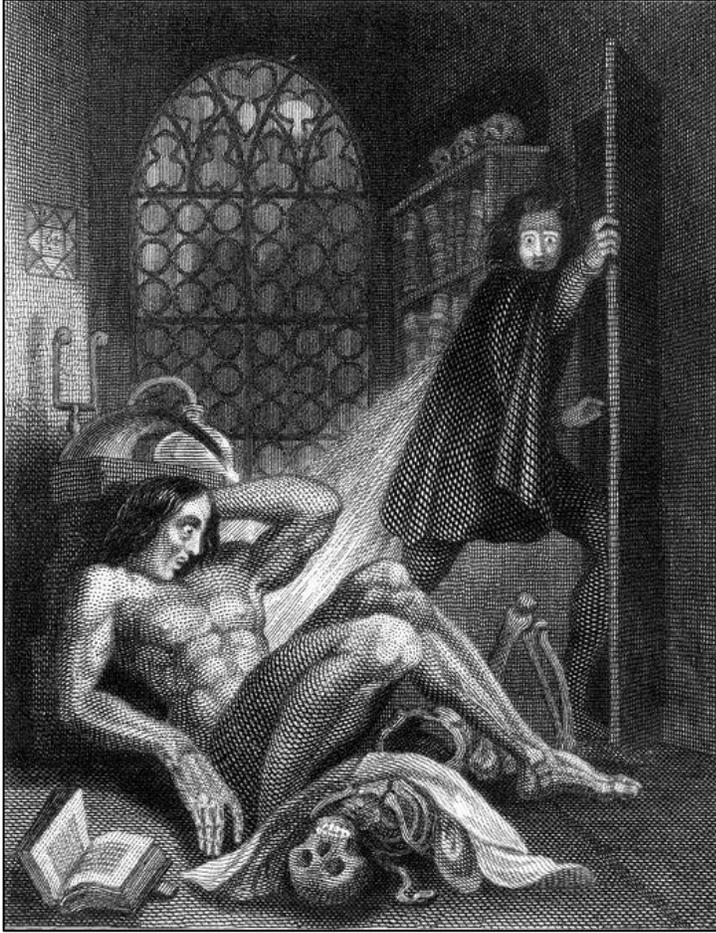


Mad Science

Any genre related to science fiction needs to touch on technology and science in some way. Sword and planet, with all of its mysticism, has a foundation on science.

Not hard science, not realistic science. But, twisted and demented science.

Experiments – The hero either discovers experiments or is experimented upon. The experiments can be genetic, eugenic, psychological, sociological, or political.



Entire countries, cities, or towns can be the subjects of experiments. Having the PCs stumble upon a town that is being experimented upon would be classic sword and planet.

The Power of Science as a Corrupting Influence – This is typical of the time periods that defined sword and planet. The pace of scientific advancement causes fear. The ability to do something outpaces the question of whether that thing ought to be done. A pure scientific outlook leads to coldness and a lack of compassion.

Science must be pursued without any heed or thought as to consequences. More ore must be mined. More ships must be constructed. More experiments must be performed. More powerful weapons must be built. The purpose for these things has been lost long ago, only a maddened quest for more remains.

Use these ideas in your villains. Of course, a player character could begin with these attitudes and progress with a character arc.

Clones and Frankenstein Monsters – The creation of life by scientific or quasi-scientific or mystical means is a recurring theme. Weaving the reanimation of dead flesh, constructed beings, or sentient machines into your campaign will capture the flavor of the genre.

Airships – Let’s be clear, we’re not talking about airplanes. We’re talking airships. In many cases, the airship looks exactly like an ocean sailing vessel. The main difference being they sail a wider blue sea.

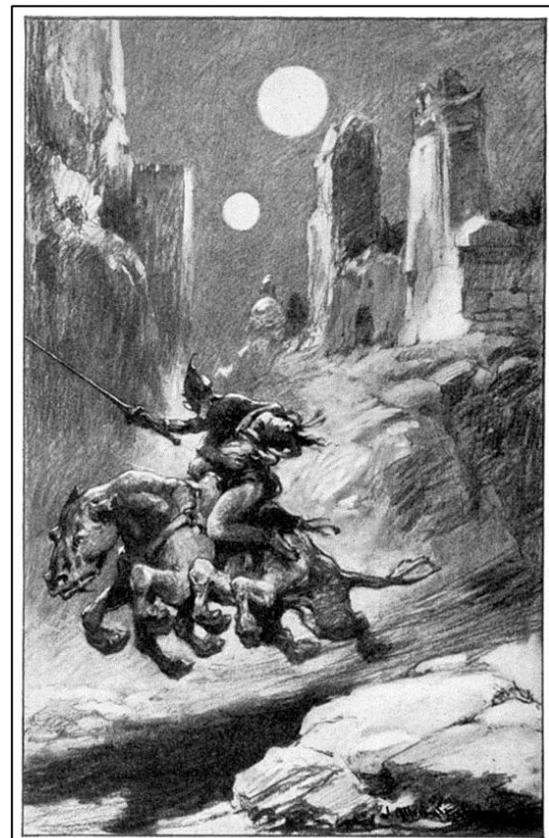
The means of propulsion should be kept mysterious with only hints about the wonders of the ancients. However, somewhat conventional dirigibles or zeppelins would fit perfectly into a sword and planet setting.

Sources of Power – Many quests involve the abuse, the discovery, or the destruction of a source of power. Crystals or pseudo-scientific technologies rife with terrible consequences, if turned to evil, are common plot devices.

Brainstorm out ideas for your campaign – the more fantastic, the better.

A scientist hermit discovered how to contain gravity. Now, the villain has a bottle of gravity he is going to drop on the capital city of the party’s adopted country. It will implode destroying the entire city.

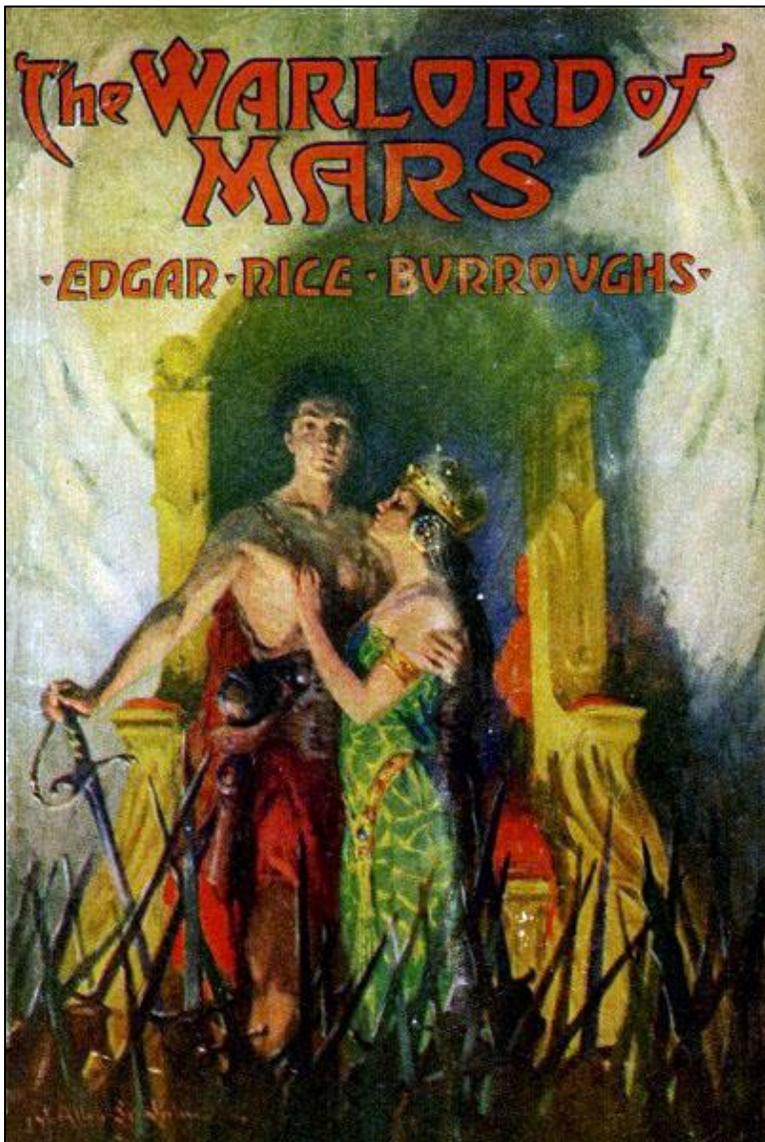
The ancient crystal powering the city has cracked. It must be repaired, but the only one who can is a scientist whose existence is only whispered in legend.



AS THE GREAT THOAT AND HIS RIDER HURTTLED PAST, CARTHORIS SWUNG HIS LONG-SWORD IN A MIGHTY CUT.
Frontispiece—(Page 170)

Death Rays – Yes, the giant contraptions that need time to power up giving the hero just enough time to destroy it. Use them or don’t. However, a good old-fashioned death ray can really set the tone for a sword and planet campaign.

Takeaway: *Work bizarre and odd science into your campaign.*



Adventure

However you build your campaign, there is one element that defines sword and planet, which cannot be left out –adventure.

Dangling is heavily involved. Dangling from cliffs, from towers, from airships is a must. Throw your characters into positions where someone is dangling from something high.

Even in worlds with firearms and ray guns, swordplay is a requirement. The genre says “sword” right in the name. Give your characters many opportunities to swordfight. Nothing satisfies like meeting the villain and his top henchmen in a sword fight.

Sword and planet was made for rescues and escapes. The more daring and the more narrow the rescues and escapes, the more your players will become invested in the campaign.

Conquering armies and large-scale battles create the scope and sweep of a world. They also raise the stakes. The fate of the city is not the only thing that hangs in the balance. The fate of the world hangs in the balance as well.

Pirates, pirates, pirates. Pirates are great. Adventure follows pirates around like a jolly puppy. They have a knack for showing up at the worst possible time. They always throw a wrench into the heroes' or the villains' plans or both.

Takeaway: *Turn on the adventure and do not let up.*

Building Your Sword and Planet Campaign

Now that we covered the elements of sword and planet, it's time to think about your campaign.

Here are some things to consider:

- What planet do the adventures take place on? What are its characteristics? Is it a dying world or a healthy one?
- What are a few of the main sentient species on the planet? There should be several, but don't go overboard. Think of a strong race, an intelligent race, and an alien one.
- What types of governments exist on the world? Tribes and city-states are the most popular.
- How many of the player characters are going to be from earth? At least one needs to be, but more can be as well.
- How is the earthling character (or characters) introduced to the cultures of the new world? Use coincidence to your advantage at the start of the campaign.

8 SWORD AND PLANET SEED IDEAS

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If you consider all of these things, you will be well equipped to run a sword and planet RPG campaign.

No matter what elements you decide to include or exclude, use your imagination. Wild imagination is a hallmark of sword and planet. Focus on the fantastic. Give your players adventure.

The campaign should be rollicking fun.

RPG Links and Resources

[*Adventures on Dungeon Planet*](#) (You need [*Dungeon World*](#) to play.) – I bought and read through this supplement. It is excellent and really captures the spirit of sword and planet.

[*Swords of Almuric: Barbarians of Lemuria Edition*](#) – I haven't read through this one, but I've heard good things about it.

[*Savage Worlds: MARS Bundle*](#) – I love the Savage Worlds systems. I'm looking forward to checking this setting out. This bundle includes a number of supplements and modules.

[*D6xD6 RPG A Cowboy on Mars World Setting*](#) – Sword and planet setting for the D6xD6 RPG system. I don't know anything about either the system or the setting, but it sounds great. Heck, it's only 69 cents.

[*Warriors of the Red Planet*](#) – I'm not familiar with this game either, but it's based on the D20 system.

[*Sword and Planet*](#) – The Wikipedia summary of the genre plus a list of novels and books.

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