On Mighty Thews

Simon Carryer

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Acknowledgements

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Welcome

On Mighty Thews is a game for creating pulp fantasy short stories. You and a couple of friends will tell a story together in the vein of such authors as Robert Howard, Michael Moorcock, and Fritz Lieber.

One player will be the "Game Master" or "GM", and will be responsible for organizing the scenes and pacing of the story, and playing the role of the characters' opposition.

The other players will play the roles of the heroes of the story. They're responsible for playing their characters, helping the characters get what they want, and for adding content to the story that lets them show off their characters' abilities and that furthers the plot of the story.

Beginning Play

The first thing you need to do is decide who is going to be the Game Master (GM). Usually that should be the person who knows the rules best (since the GM will have to make decisions about the rules sometimes), or else whoever feels like it. After that, the other players should make characters.

Making Characters

Each player except the Game Master should make a character. Making a character means making up a fictional hero for the story you're going to make together. Characters have a number of attributes and abilities that tell you what role the character plays in the story, what they're like, and how good they are at achieving various things.

Before you start, you should have a vague idea of who the character is that you want to make - are they a warrior from a distant land, an adventurer with a dark past, a student of mystical arts, or something else entirely?

You should take six dice, one each of four, six, eight, ten, twelve and twenty-sided. How you assign these dice will tell the GM and the other players what your character is like.

Attributes

First, take the four, eight, and twelve-sided dice, and assign them to the three "fixed" attributes, "Warrior", "Sorcerer" and "Explorer". These attributes are the three main roles that characters play in the game, and your ranking of them represents how well the character fills that role. The more sides the die you put in an attribute has, the better the character fits that role. Every character in On Mighty Thews has at least a little ability in each of the roles. A barbarian from the frozen wastes may be a deadly warrior, but she also remembers tales told by the shaman around the campfire. An acolyte of the dark priests may have dedicated his life to arcane study, but he also carries a sword and knows how to use it.

Warrior covers all kinds of fighting (with any weapon), physical attempts to harm someone, knowledge of warfare, weaponry, and armour, and social interactions with military types.

Sorcerer, covers use of book-learning, deciphering script, resisting spells, academic debate, and interactions with magical beings. Having a high Sorcerer attribute does not automatically mean the character can fling spells around at will. See later for rules on magic.

Explorer covers any physical action that's not combat. Climbing, running, avoiding, disabling devices and constructing makeshift tools and weapons. It also covers any interactions with exotic cultures and attempts to influence members of such.

Abilities

Now, you need to create two extra abilities. These define what makes your character special - the iconic abilities of the character.

Abilities should be reasonably broad areas of expertise, signature items of equipment, or a kind of magic power. "Making Jewelry" is too specific, and should be "Making things" or "Good with my hands". "Fighting" is too broad, and should be "Brawling" or "Two-Handed Swording" or "Warfare". Abilities can be occupations, in which case they should cover all the skills of that occupation. You can begin to add color to the story in the form of setting details or other people in the names of your abilities. "Archer of Berenoth" or "The King's Executioner" for example, are abilities which add richness to the world and the character.

Once you've made your character's two abilities, you need to assign one of them a ten-sided die, and the other a six sider.

Magic Powers

In On Mighty Thews, magic is not the preserve of a particular class of people with unique magical abilities. Magic is not pyrotechnic spells, or mystical abilities.

Rather, all characters have the ability to make use of magical lore. Magic is the use of ancient secrets, forgotten technology, and supernatural pacts to influence the world around you.

When making abilities, don't make overt magical powers like "Fireball" or "Black Magic". Instead, make abilities that tell us how your character knows the ancient secrets they will use in the game. Abilities like "Stygian Adept" or "Demon Summoner" or "Scion of the Ancient Houses". Later on, you'll learn how to use these abilities to create forgotten lore which your character can exploit.

d20 Trait

Last, you need your d20 trait. This is named after the die that goes along with it, the 20-sided one. It's the most powerful and important trait the character has.

Your character's d20 trait should be a single word that defines how the character acts most of the time. It should be a way of being that your character can demonstrate or act against in almost any scene.

When choosing traits, make sure it's a way of being that will come up reasonably often. "Kind to Animals" is too specific, and would be better as "Kind-Hearted" or "Uncivilised". "Cautious" or "Pacifist" are great, as are "Coward" or "Hero". Choose a trait that says something about the character, and also represents an idea you think would be interesting to explore in the game. If it's your first time playing the game, pick your character's d20 trait from the following list:

Recommended d20 Traits

Callous	Cold	Human	Mercenary
Detached	Faithful	Fatalistic	Civilised
Cerebral	Loyal	Melancholy	Vengeful

You'll get a reward for every scene in which your character follows their d20 trait, but once per scene if your character acts against their trait, they are especially powerful. There'll be more on d20 traits later.

By this time you should have some kind of idea of who your character is. Give them a name, and maybe write a couple of words about their job or role in the story.

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I want to make a desert nomad character, kind of a mix of Ghengis Khan and Lawrence of Arabia. First I have to assign my four, eight and twelve-sided dice to the three attributes. I choose Explorer for my twelve sider. The character has travelled extensively, and knows how to get out of a tricky situation. I choose Warrior for my eight sider. He's a tough fighter and the veteran of more than a few battles. That leaves me with the four sider for Sorcerer. He's probably picked up a few rumours in his travels, and heard the odd arcane secret whispered in the back alleys of some desert city, but he's no student of the arts.

Now I make up two abilities for the character. I want something that speaks to the character's nomadic side, so I choose "Skilled Horseman", and assign it my six-sided die. I also want something that relates to the character's relationship to others, so I choose "Leader of Men" and give it the ten sider.

Now I need a d20 trait. I want the character to be a bit of an anti-hero, in the style of some of the great pulp fantasy stories, so I choose "Cruel" as

his d20 trait. I'll get a bonus in every scene where the character is cruel to people, but on the occasions where he shows kindness, he'll be extra powerful.

Last, I will need a name. I'll call him "Ochir the Reaver".

The GM

While the other players are making characters, the Game Master should be facilitating the process, and trying to organise the disparate characters into a coherent group. Ask the other players questions about their characters, to draw out story ideas. You can help the players with ideas for their characters, and at the same time look for common threads between the characters, and suggest relationships. Draw out commonalities. If one player has the ability "My Father's Sword", for example, ask the other players if they knew that character's father. Perhaps you can generate a little back-story before play starts.

The Map

Take a piece of paper to be the map of the world your game will take place in. The first thing that you establish is the "poles" of the map. Each player should draw a point on the map, and write the name of their character's d20 trait next to it. Poles can be anywhere on the map, from the corners to dead in the middle. These poles define the world.

Things close to a pole will display the associated trait strongly, and as you travel away from the poles, things take on a nature in opposition to that trait. The poles define the culture, and even the geography of the world. For example, if your character's d20 trait is "Mercenary", people who live close to that pole will have allegiances that are easily bought and sold.

The people's culture and their institutions will all reflect their negotiable loyalties. Away from that pole, people have more permanent allegiances.

The poles can even influence the natural world. At the pole of "Melancholy" it could rain constantly, or be shrouded in mist. The "Cold" pole could be an ice-locked waste.

Have every player, including the GM, draw a few things onto the piece of paper to make a map. Draw in things that you are excited to see in the game, and things that draw on your characters' backgrounds. You can make the map large in scale, drawing cities and mountain ranges and swamps (make sure to give everything names), or you can make the map smaller in scale, drawing individual buildings, paths through the woods, cave mouths, and so on.

When everyone has added one or two things to the map, and named those things, sit back and look at it. Does the map evoke a situation in your mind? What's the most exciting place on the map? Are there any obvious points of conflict? If there are two cities on the map, maybe the cities are at war? If there's a cave, maybe something lives in the cave? Start your game somewhere exciting, with the characters embroiled in one of the conflicts suggested by the map. Don't worry overmuch about working out all the details. What you need is the basis for a first scene - where are the characters, and what are they doing?

Don't try to bring everything on the map into your opening situation. It's fine, ideal even, if you only see a small part of the world in your game. Focus on exploring one small area on the map, and let the other parts come up in play if they need to. Rather than telling a story of an epic journey across the land, it's better to have multiple short games, each focusing on intense action in a single location.

Summary

To make a character:
- Assign the four, eight, and twelve-sided dice to the attributes "Warrior", "Sorcerer", and "Explorer". More sides means your character is better at that role.
- Make up two abilities for your character, and assign them the six-sided and ten-sided dice.
- Choose a d20 trait for your character. Make sure it's something that you can imagine the character following or acting against.
- Name the character, write a couple of sentences about them if you like, and you're done.

Starting the game:
- Everyone draws a point on a piece of paper, and writes their character's d20 trait next to it. These are the "poles" of the world.
- Everyone draws a few exciting things on the map. Name them!
- Choose an exciting place on the map, and decide what the characters are doing there.

Tips

- A character in On Mighty Thews should be a powerful master of their own fate - an exceptional individual with strong drives and passions. This is someone who won't just let events unfold, they take action!

Scenes

Everything that happens during the game happens in "scenes", which are like small sections of the story. In each scene, the players say what their characters do, and the Game Master describes the world around the characters, and how it reacts to them.

The First Scene

At the start of the first scene, it's the GM's job to set the scene for the players. Describe who is there, what's happening, and where it's all going on. The scene should start with the first step in the characters' plan, or otherwise a small goal that will lead them into greater trouble. It could be "gather information in a seedy tavern full of thieves and cutthroats" or "find a way into the cave mouth". You only need to sketch out the details of the scenery and what's happening. To establish your first scene, you should look back at the map you've all made, and work out what the characters are doing, and in what part of the world. If you've already found an exciting place in the map for the characters to be, or a situation in which they're embroiled, that's great. Otherwise, talk about who the characters are, and what they might want, to establish an exciting starting situation. From that you can frame your first scene. You need to know where the characters are, what they're doing when the scene starts, and what they want.

Let the players ask you questions to establish further details. From the first scene onwards, the players interact with the world of the game through their characters. They say what their characters do, and you tell them the result. Normally, you can just describe the result based on what seems to make sense. The GM describes new characters who meet the players' characters and react to them based on their personality and desires.

The players' characters move around in the world, and interact with the people and things you, as GM, describe.

There are three situations in which instead of just describing what happens next, you roll the dice: If a player describes their character doing something **dangerous**, if two or more characters (players' characters or GM's characters) are **competing** over something, or if two or more characters are **fighting** each other.

A situation is **dangerous** if something bad could result from what the character is doing. This could be an obvious danger, like falling off a sheer cliff face, or a less obvious danger, like a poisoned cup of wine.

Characters are **competing** if they both want the same thing, or if one wants something and the other is trying to stop them. If neither side backs down, it's time to roll dice.

Characters are **fighting** if they are physically trying to hurt each other, or they're trying to get something else they want by physically dominating another character.

In addition to these three kinds of conflict, there's one other time you'll roll dice. Any time that the characters have discovered something new, whether it's a person, place, or thing, they can choose to make a **lore** roll. Lore rolls represent what the character already knows about the world. They're also how characters use magical power. You'll learn more about lore rolls later on.

As a player, it's your job to advocate for your character. Try to get them what they want, within the bounds of what that character would do.

When describing what the character does, think about what the character wants, how the character thinks and acts, and also about what's exciting and interesting for you and the other players.

As Game Master, I open the scene saying "The desert sun beats down on you as you enter the city of Khandallah. The wind howls, and the tents flutter and snap. You can see camel merchants and other city denizens milling around the crowded streets. You're here to find Chuul the Gazzir, the man who kidnapped your clansmen for slaves."

One of the players chimes in, speaking for their character. "I approach one of the merchants to ask if they know of this Chuul."

Chuul has many spies and friends in this city, so asking after him could easily get back to him. It sounds like the player's character is attempting something dangerous.

Ending Scenes

Another of the GM's jobs is to decide when scenes end. Scenes end when the characters have achieved what they were trying to do in the scene, have failed without hope of recovery, or have changed their goals considerably. A good rule of thumb is that if the characters have left for a new location, it's time for a new scene.

An important thing happens at the end of scenes, which is that players of characters who acted in accordance with their d20

trait are eligible to take a re-roll token. These tokens can be used at any time to re-roll any dice you've just rolled.

If you think you've played your character according to their d20 trait, and they haven't done anything in the scene that goes against that trait, then you should go ahead and take a re-roll token (you'll find the rules for using these later on). Only you can make this decision about your character, but it's fine to ask other players what they think. You should be taking a token in most scenes where your character doesn't explicitly act against their trait.

New Scenes

New scenes should start at the next interesting thing that might happen to the characters. As with the first scene, the GM should frame scenes at their beginning. The GM and the players should discuss what the characters are doing, where they're going, and what are some likely new scenes, but the GM gets the final call. The GM then describes the opening scenes, and the players can ask questions to establish details as normal.

If there's nothing interesting going to happen in the scene, or you need to establish some information before the scene starts, you can gloss over it with a brief description. In between scenes can go little "cut" scenes that explain how the characters got from the last scene to the next one: "You ride on camel-back through the desert for days. Your water is dwindling and food running low by the time you see the spires of the desert-city in the distance." or "You wander lost in the mirror-maze for what feels like hours, before stumbling into a lushly appointed chamber." or "The rat-men lead you deep into their burrows, you're turned-around and lost by the time you're brought face-to-face with their twisted, bloated, hairless leader."

Summary

Framing scenes:
- Game Master: Establish where the characters are, who else is there, and what the characters are trying to achieve. If it's the first scene, look to the map you've created to work out what situation the characters find themselves in.
- Players: Tell the GM what your character is trying to achieve, where they're going and how they're getting there. If it's the first scene, work out what your character's reason for being in this situation is, and what they hope to get out of it.

Starting Scenes:
- Game Master: Describe the scene, the surroundings, and any people present. You can describe short "cut" scenes to establish important information.
- Players: Ask questions to establish details, describe what your character is doing.

During scenes:
- Game Master: Tell the players what's happening in the scene, how people react to the characters, and suggest ideas and actions. Answer the players' questions, and be vigilant for dangerous, competing, and fighting conflicts.
- Players: Say what your character is doing. Try to get your character what they want, but also think about what's interesting to you and to the other players. When new things are introduced, you can ask for a lore roll to see what your character knows about it. Seek out conflict!

Ending scenes:
- Game Master: End scenes when the characters have achieved their goal in the scene, have changed locations, or have failed totally.
- Players: Take a re-roll token if your character has acted according to their d20 Trait.

Tips

- When framing scenes, try to cut to the most interesting part of the story. Get to where the players want their characters to be, exactly when they want to be there.
- Don't be afraid to cut past anything that you're not personally interested in, or that you think the players don't care about.
- GMs, let the players tell you how they've come to be in the new situation. That said, sometimes it's fun to throw in complications – ambushes along the way.
- If you're GMing, and you're stuck for ideas, tell the players that there's something waiting for the characters, something watching them, or something trying to hide from them. If they go near, it's a dangerous conflict. The danger is that they won't see whatever it is until it's too late - until it's gotten away, until it leaps to attack them, or until it has warned its friends. This will kick-start some action in your scene.

Rolling Dice

As described above, there are three situations in which you need to roll dice. These are when players describe their characters doing something **dangerous**, when two or more characters are **competing**, or when two or more characters are **fighting**. These situations are called "conflicts", and each situation has slightly different rules.

Re-Rolls

At the end of every scene, if your character acted in accordance with their d20 trait, you can take a re-roll token.

You can use these tokens any time just after you've rolled your dice. Discard the token, pick up all the dice you just rolled, and roll them again. The stakes or intents in the conflict don't change. You can only use one re-roll per conflict.

Dangerous Conflicts

These are conflicts where a single character is doing something dangerous, and you don't know what the result is going to be. Jumping across a gap, spotting an ambush before they get you, sailing a stormy sea, and so on.

GMs, bring up dangerous conflicts when the characters do dangerous stuff, even if they don't know it's dangerous. Just tell the player that what their character is doing is dangerous: "Ok, you're going down the stairs? The danger is you won't see the ambush waiting for you."

Once it's established that you're in a dangerous conflict, the GM and the player should decide on the general stakes of the conflict. "Do I make it across the gap, or fall in?", "Do I see the ambush before they jump me?" and "Do I navigate the storm, or are we shipwrecked?" are all good ways to frame a conflict. The consequences of failure may involve the character being injured. See below for rules for that.

Strictly speaking, the player says what the character wants to achieve, and the GM says what the price of failure is. In reality though, there's scope for negotiation here. If the price of failure sounds too steep, the player might ask for more out of success. Either person can suggest cool ideas to the other player. It's a good idea to make the price of failure interesting, and advance the story, rather than stopping it. "Can you wrestle the boulder away from the doorway, or is it stuck fast?" is boring. "Can you wrestle the boulder away from the doorway, or does the sound of your exertions draw the attention of what lurks in the pit?" is better. Don't set up stakes where the character gets what they want even if they lose, like "Do I jump the chasm, or do I get hurt but make it across?" Failure should never leave the characters exactly where they started, either. Remember, you're only rolling if it's something dangerous!

Decide which attribute (Sorcerer, Warrior, or Explorer) covers the current conflict, and if the character has any relevant abilities (the two traits assigned the six-sided and ten-sided dice). This is based on what the character is trying to do, and also on the consequences for failure. If the ability would be useful to help the character achieve their goal, or prevent the consequences of failure, it's relevant. For example, the ability "Tough as Nails" could be used on almost any conflict where the consequences of failure involve damage to the character.

It's perfectly acceptable for two abilities to apply to a single conflict, but only one attribute should apply, so the most a player could roll would be three dice, with two or one being much more common.

Roll the attribute and ability dice. Pick the highest result from the dice. If your highest result is less than four, the character has lost the conflict. The consequences of failure happen, as narrated by the GM. The GM is constrained by the stated consequences of failure, and the rules for damage below. If the player rolls four or more, then the character wins the conflict. Here's where things get a bit tricky. You need to work out the degree of success. Subtract the number needed for success (usually four) from the number the player rolled. Divide by two. The result is the degree of success. In simpler terms, **for every two points by which you beat the target number, you get one degree of success**.

Winning Dangerous Conflicts

On winning the conflict, the player gets to narrate the outcome of the conflict, guided by the original stakes of the conflict. With no degree of success (i.e. the player rolled the target number exactly, or only one over the target number) the player is limited by what they asked for in the initial framing of the conflict. For every degree of success, the player can purchase the following:

- A fact about the character's success
- A +1 bonus to a future action

Facts

The facts that players make up can be anything that's somewhat related to the current conflict. If the conflict is "Do I see what's out there before it sees me?", the player could make up any kind of information about what is seen, using facts to detail them.

For example "I see five (one fact) bandits (another fact), and they look like they're preparing an ambush (a third fact)." or "I read the runes correctly (the stakes), they say "Here is buried the treasure of Queen Isha" (one fact) and they're written in the language of the ancient moon-people (a second fact).""

Facts should be things that could naturally be the result of the character winning the conflict, so "I roll the boulder out of the cave mouth (the stakes), and discover a chamber filled with stalagmites (a fact)" is good, but "I roll the boulder out of the cave mouth (the stakes) and then I discover that the Demon Prince is secretly behind it all (a fact)" isn't. The idea is to make sure it's important what the conflicts are actually about, rather than them just being an excuse to make up more stuff.

Bonuses

The bonuses which players can claim must be for a single, specific conflict, and there must be some way for the character to get that bonus from that conflict. For example "I spot whatever it is (the stakes), and I get +1 for fighting it" or "I open the door (the stakes), and because I'm first in, I get +1 for finding any treasure in there". The bonuses can be related to facts the player has stated from the same conflict. They can refer to events far in the future, that may never be realized. They can also be stacked, for +2 or greater bonuses. This is a great way to use up a lot of degree of success when you're out of ideas for facts. Bonuses are also a great way to flag what you'd like to see happen later in the game. Taking "+1 to finding the inner sanctum of the temple" is a great way to signal that you'd like conflicts about finding the temple's inner sanctum. This lets the GM plan ahead for you, and gives ideas for facts to the other players. The bonuses can also be conferred to other characters, at the time they are created.

Other Characters

If more than one character is in the same conflict, and they're helping each other, the players can both roll their dice, and then pick the highest amongst them. The player who rolled highest counts degree of success as normal, and can spend it on facts and bonuses as normal, but their narration should take into account the other character's actions.

If a character controlled by the GM is trying to do something to a PC, or is doing anything at all that the PCs don't wish to happen, it's never a dangerous conflict. Only players' characters can initiate dangerous conflicts.

Sosanna of the Steppes is riding through some bandits' camp at full speed, trying to snatch a young captive from their midst while they slumber. This is a dangerous act, and as such, sparks a conflict. Sosanna's player and the GM discuss the stakes, and come to "Does Sosanna snatch up the young boy, or do the bandits awaken and stop her first?" They decide that Explorer is the most appropriate attribute here - it's a physical action that's not combat. Looking at Sosanna's abilities "Without Fear" stands out as applicable. What she's doing is extremely reckless. Sosanna has a twelve-sided die for Explorer, and a six sider for Without Fear. Her player rolls the dice, trying to get four or better. The roll is four on the six sider, and ten on the twelve sider. The player picks the higher, the ten. It's a success!

Comparing the ten to the number needed for success, four, the player finds they have a degree of success of three (the player succeeded by six,

and you get one degree of success for every two points you succeeded by). Three degrees of success means the player can narrate Sosanna's success, and can include up to three facts or bonuses to future actions. The player narrates:

"Sosanna rides through the camp, her horse leaping over the sleeping forms of the bandits. She snatches up the young boy from the center of their camp (the stakes of the conflict), and rides out the other side unharmed (one fact). The boy is unharmed (another fact), and the bandits are confused and frightened, giving me a +1 the next time I fight them (a +1 bonus)."

Injuring Players' Characters

When a player character loses a conflict, part of the consequences of failure can be injury to the character. Any single conflict can only injure a character once. The GM should describe a minor injury, such as broken ribs, cuts and gashes, torn muscles, lost skin, a broken nose, and so on. Describe how the character was injured during the conflict.

Note the injury on the character's sheet. In future conflicts, the character's player can choose to remove the injury by applying a -2 penalty to their dice roll. To do this, they must describe how the injury is hampering the character. The character suffers a -2 penalty to the roll for that one conflict, but then the injury can be removed from the character sheet.

If a character already has three injuries, then any further injuries will take the character out of the scene. You should decide in the group what that means, whether players characters can die, or if they are just knocked out.

In any case, the only way to remove injuries on your character's sheet is to have the injury hamper the character. To stop your character from being taken out of the scene, you need to find ways to have the character suffer from their injuries. Blood loosens their grip on their weapon, or gets in their eyes, a sprained ankle turns underneath them as they spring from hiding, cracked ribs hamper their breathing.

On the other hand, a roll might be too important to risk taking a -2 penalty. In that case you can describe the character gritting their teeth and ignoring the pain. The character only suffers the penalty when you want them to.

Artemisia of Kos entered a dangerous conflict - an attempt to snatch a jeweled statue from a burning brazier without being burned. She loses the conflict, and the GM describes her hands as burnt and swollen. The skin is red and tender.

Later, Artemisia is climbing a rope, ascending out of the temple as water rushes to fill it. Artemisia's player describes her climbing: "She's gritting her teeth, trying to grab the rope with her burnt hands, but she can't make herself do it. She can't grip hard enough, and it slows her down." Artemisia takes a -2 penalty to the roll to climb the rope before the water engulfs her.

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d20 Traits

There's one other thing to remember about conflicts. If a character is in a conflict, and what they're doing goes against their d20 trait, the player gets to roll an extra 20-sided die for the conflict.

For example, if your character's d20 trait is "Coward", but the character is doing something brave, like leaping from an open window onto a passing cart, then you get to roll a 20-sided die. However, you can only invoke this rule **once per scene**.

Tusa the Thief is scaling the walls of the snake-people's tower, trying to find a window above the lower-level guard rooms. That's definitely dangerous, sparking a conflict. It's also brave, and Tusa's d20 trait is "Coward". Tusa's player will be able to roll a 20-sided die for the conflict.

Summary

Dangerous Conflicts:

- Call for these conflicts when characters are doing something dangerous.
- Decide on the stakes of the conflict. No boring outcomes!
- Choose one relevant attribute and any appropriate abilities, and take the dice for them.
- Once per scene, if your character is acting against their d20 Trait, take a 20 sided die as well.
- Roll the dice! You can spend a re-roll token to re-roll them all.
- If you roll four or more on your highest die, your character gets the stakes.
- For every two points by which your highest die beats four, you get one fact, or one +1 bonus to a future action.

Injuring Players' Characters:
- If a character loses a dangerous conflict, or a fighting conflict, they might be injured.
- The GM should describe the injury, and the player should write it down.
- When the character is in a conflict, the player can describe the character being hampered by the injury, take a -2 penalty to their roll, and remove the injury.
- If a character has three injuries, any further injuries take the character out of the scene.

Tips

- If you're stuck for what to do with degrees of success, first, ask yourself "What would I find most exciting?" Chances are, if you find it exciting, the other players at the table do as well.
- Second, ask yourself "What works?" It's always good to add facts to the game that work with what's already been established, and that answer questions that have arisen in the scene
- Last, ask yourself "How is this relevant to my character?" It's important that the events of the story stay relevant to the main characters. If they're not, invent something to make it so.

Competing Conflicts

Competing Conflicts occur whenever a character is doing something that's actively opposed by another character, be it a player's character, or a character controlled by the GM. When two characters' goals conflict, and only one can be successful, it's a competing conflict. Two characters racing up the steep sides of a pyramid to reach the jewel at the top is a competing conflict. One character trying to haggle another down for the price of a camel is a competing conflict. You only roll competing conflicts when one of the characters involved is controlled by a player other than the Game Master.

Like with a dangerous conflict, you should decide the stakes of the conflict. What are the characters competing about? Usually it will be either "Who gets the thing we both want" or "Do I get what I want, or do you stop me?"

The player rolls dice as if it were a dangerous conflict, choosing the appropriate attribute and any relevant abilities, and rolling in their d20 trait if the character is acting against it. Unlike a dangerous conflict, the target number, rather than being fixed at four, is based on a dice roll, determined by the type of character they're facing. Players can narrate facts based on their success, as with a dangerous conflict.

Types of Game Master characters

Game Master characters get dice, like players' characters. Unlike players' characters, they usually only have one or a few dice, and they cover a broad range of things.

GM characters come in two kinds: **Major characters**, and **minor characters**. Minor characters are everyday people, foot-soldiers and lackeys, underlings and bystanders. Major characters are terrifying monsters, motivated villains, and powerful leaders.

Minor GM characters have a single ability, which they use for all conflicts in which they're involved. This ability is the name of the type of character, with "ing" on the end. Guards have a single die in "Guarding". Fang Monsters have a single die in "Fang Monstering". The type of die is determined by how tough an opponent the GM thinks they should be. This kind of character can use their single attribute for any conflict. If they're being called into a conflict in which their attribute seems wildly inappropriate, it might be a sign that the conflict is poorly framed, or that there shouldn't be a conflict at all.

Major characters have a single ability like minor characters (which could be a 10 or 12 sided die), these characters get two abilities which they can roll alongside their regular die in relevant conflicts. The GM should feel free to define these abilities on the spot, and players too can use facts to suggest them. Major character abilities should be similar in scope to normal abilities. The abilities are given a ten-sided and six-sided dice, just like a player's character.

If a character is in an competing conflict with more than one opponent, and the opponents all share a single goal, the GM can roll a die for each of the characters, and pick the highest result. If the player rolls equal to or greater than the target number (the highest number rolled by an opponent) then degree of success is determined as usual, and the player may narrate success as per a dangerous conflict.

Winning Competing Conflicts

When a player's highest die beats the GM's highest die, the player's character has won the conflict. You determine degree of success just like with a dangerous conflict. The player can describe their character getting the stakes of the conflict, and depending on the degree of success, the player can gain additional benefits. These are:

- A fact about the character's success
- A +1 bonus to a future action
- Take out a minor GM character in the conflict
- Injure a major GM character in the conflict

Injuring GM Characters

When facing minor characters, a single degree of success spent on injuring the character in a competing conflict is enough to take the character out of the scene, and kill the character at the player's option. GM characters may only be damaged in a conflict in which they are taking part, but if the GM has multiple characters in a conflict, the player may take out one minor character for each degree of success spent on this. This means that the only way to take out multiple characters with a single conflict is to have a conflict against multiple opponents.

Against major characters, damage works differently. The player should describe the injury to the character. The player can describe any kind of injury, from cuts and scrapes to broken bones and severed limbs. The GM should write down each injury the character receives.

When the GM's character gets into conflicts, the GM can describe how the injury hampers the character, and take a -2 penalty to their roll. The injury is then erased.

As with players' characters, once a major GM character has accrued three injuries, any further injuries will take them out of the scene.

Zoya the Cat is creeping into the temple to filch the valuables kept behind the altar. There's a priest holding a candle in the vestibule, reading late into the night, but also keeping watch.

Zoya is trying to creep past him without making a noise. This is a competing conflict - Zoya wants to get past the priest, the priest doesn't want her to.

Zoya's player rolls a twelve-sided die for Explorer, and a ten-sider for "Cat-like" - this is really Zoya's area of expertise. The GM chooses an eight-sided die for the priest, who is a minor character. Zoya's player's highest die comes up an eight, and the GM's is a six. Zoya is successful, and has achieved one degree of success (eight is two more than six). The player uses her degree of success to take the priest (a minor character) out of the scene.

Zoya's player narrates: "Zoya creeps past the guard, as silent as her namesake, the cat. But that candle the priest is using could be useful. She creeps up behind the priest and slits his throat with her knife."

Tied Dice

Who wins ties? Here's a list:

Player vs GM Character: The player wins ties.

Player vs Player: The character acting most directly wins. If one character is trying to get something, and another is trying to stop them, the person trying to get something wins. If you're both trying to get something, it goes to fighting.

Summary

Competing Conflicts:

- Call for these conflicts when two characters' goals conflict, and only one can be successful.
- Decide on the stakes of the conflict. What are they competing over?
- Player: Choose one relevant attribute and any appropriate abilities, and take the dice for them. Once per scene, if your character is acting against their d20 Trait, take a 20 sided die as well.
- GM: Take the dice for your character or characters.
- Roll the dice!
- Whoever rolled the highest on their highest die gets the stakes.
- Player: For every two points by which your highest die beats the GM's highest die, you get one fact, one +1 bonus to a future action, or an injury against a character in the conflict.

Injuring GMs Characters:

- Minor characters are taken out of a scene if you spend one degree of success to take them out, in a conflict that character was involved in.
- Major characters take injuries when you spend degrees of success to describe injuries to them. They're taken out when they have more than three injuries.

Ties:

- Player vs GM Character: The player wins ties.
- Player vs Player: The character acting most directly wins.

Multiple Opponents:

- The GM rolls a die for each opponent on their side of the conflict, and takes the highest die.

Tips

- GMs, here's how to make your characters fun and memorable, and also easy to play: Make them want something. Their wants should be proportional in scope to the size of the die you give them. Characters with six and eight-siders want simple things: To do their job and go home, to enlist the characters' aid, to escape unharmed, to eat well for a day, to make a living. Characters with ten and twelve-siders should have grander goals: The conquest of kingdoms, apotheosis, reincarnation. Have your characters strive for their goals with passion, and treat them with honesty. The world comes alive through your characters, so make the most of them.
- Players, it's easy to kill the GM's characters. They're fragile. You can always kill them later. Ask yourself if it wouldn't be more interesting to leave them alive. You can use a degree of success to kill them off, but you can also use a fact to have them run away, start babbling secrets, or otherwise bend them to your characters' will.

Fighting Conflicts

Fighting conflicts are when two or more characters are engaged physically - you're trying to beat the ape-man's head in with an axe while it tries to throw you off the cliff. You're tying to fight your way though the cultists to the altar while they try to cut you down with their knives.

In fighting conflicts, rather than working out what's at stake in the conflict, you just need to know what each participant is trying to do. This should be a simple and brief statement: "I want to stab the thing in the mouth with my sword", "It's trying to get its jaws around your legs". "I throw my knife at the bandits", "They're cutting through the ropes of the bridge".

Once this has been established, you can roll dice. This works just like a competing conflict, with the GM rolling dice for their character, and the winning character achieving their intent. As with competing conflicts, if you're fighting multiple opponents, the GM may roll a die for every opponent, and choose the highest.

If you roll lower than the GM, your character has lost the conflict, and the GM's character gets what they were trying to do. This could mean your character is injured. However, if the GM's roll is only one point higher than your highest roll, you still get your character's intent, and can inflict injuries. That means that in fighting conflicts, both characters can achieve their intent.

If you roll equal or higher than the GM your character has won the conflict.

Winning Fighting Conflicts

When you win a fighting conflict, your character achieves their intent, as you described it before rolling.

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If they were trying to injure another character, you get one free injury using the rules for injuring GM characters from the "Competing Conflicts" section (taking out minor characters, or causing an injury to major characters).

Unlike competing conflicts, in a fighting conflict the losing character also gets their intent, and may inflict injuries if that was their intent.

Degree of success is calculated as normal, and can be spent on the following:

- A fact about the character's success
- A +1 bonus to a future action
- Take out a minor GM character in the conflict
- Injure a major GM character in the conflict
- Block the losing character's intent

Blocking Intents

If you win, you're required to spend a degree of success to block your opponent's intent, should you wish to. If you don't have enough degree of success to do so, or you choose to spend your successes on other things, your opponent achieves their intent, and may inflict injuries if that was their intent.

Say your character is dashing across a room to grab a jewel, while a massive serpent tries to entrap the character in its coils. If you beat the GM's roll, your character has the jewel. But unless you beat the GM's roll by two or more, and spend a fact, the giant snake also entraps your character. From the GM's point of view, if you beat the player, the serpent-thing has ensnared the character in its coils. But unless your roll wins by two or more, the character has also grabbed the jewell.

Geerta, Axewoman of the Shieldlands is at bay, with a ring of ape-men closing in on her. Her back is to a cliff, and the ape-men are growing closer. She must fight. Her player says what Geerta is trying to do: "She swings her axe in wide strokes, trying to open a way though." The GM says what the ape-men are doing: "They cautiously advance, searching for an opening. When they find one, they'll leap forward and bear you to the ground."

They roll. Geerta's player rolls a twelve-sided die for her Warrior attribute, and a six-sider for her Razor-sharp Axe ability. The GM rolls a six-sided die for each of the five ape-men. Geerta's player's highest die comes up a nine, and the GM's highest is a six. Geerta wins the conflict. Her intent involved damaging the ape-men, so her player narrates one of them going down screaming, with a gash in its neck. She has one degree of success, so the player has a choice - take out another ape man, or block them bearing her to the ground? Geerta does her best work with her axe, so it's better for her to stay on her feet. The player opts to block the ape-men. She narrates the hairy beasts backing off as they see their fellow go down.

Summary

Fighting Conflicts:
- Call for these conflicts when two or more characters are fighting with each other.
- Everyone says what their character is trying to do.

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- Player: Choose one relevant attribute and any appropriate abilities, and take the dice for them. Once per scene, if your character is acting against their d20 Trait, take a 20 sided die as well.
- GM: Take the dice for your character or characters.
- Roll the dice!
- Whoever rolled the highest on their highest die, their character succeeds at what they were trying to do. If that was hurting the other character, you can take out minor characters, and give major characters (or players' characters) an injury.
- Player: You can choose to spend one degree of success (one fact worth) to block your opponent's intent. Otherwise they get their intent and may give you a penalty if that was their intent.
- GM: If you win by two or more, the player's character does not get their intent.

Damaging GMs Characters:
- Minor characters are taken out of a scene if that was your intent, or you spend one degree of success to take them out, in a conflict that character was involved in.
- Major characters take injuries if that was your intent, or when you spend degrees of success to describe injuries to them. They're taken out when they have more than three injuries.

Multiple Opponents:
- The GM rolls a die for each opponent on their side of the conflict, and takes the highest die.

Ties:
- Player vs GM Character: The player wins ties.
- Player vs Player: The character acting most directly wins.

Tips

- Declare interesting intents. Push people off cliffs, cut ropes, kill hostages, carry people away.
- GMs, go after weak characters. Force the other characters to defend someone.
- Give your major characters very specific abilities. Give the players ways to disable or disqualify the abilities.
- End combats quickly. Players get frustrated by combat dragging on, long before they get frustrated by winning too easily. Have your characters run away, surrender, deploy traps and cast spells.
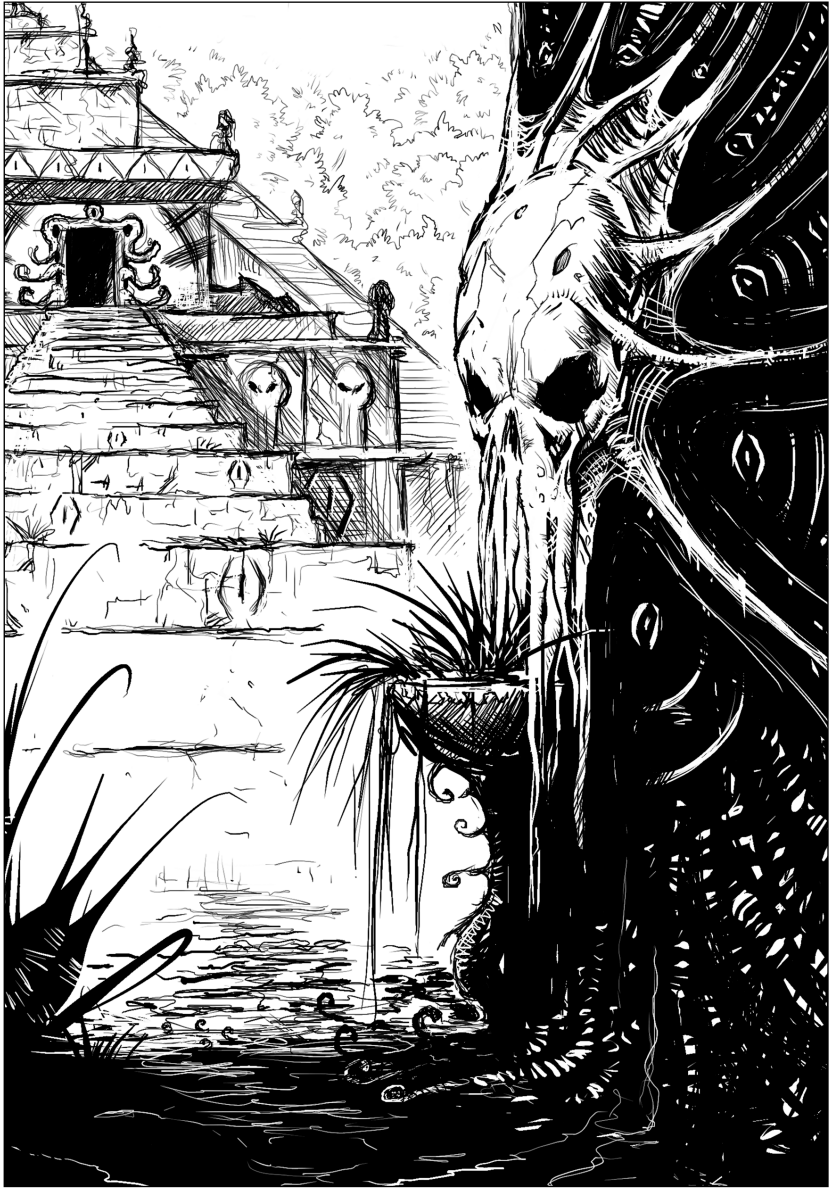
Lore Rolls

When something new is introduced into a scene, whether by the GM or by a player as a "fact" won from a conflict, any player can call for a Lore roll on behalf of their character.

Lore represents all the rumours, legends, forgotten secrets, and ancient wisdom of the world. When you make a lore roll, you're rolling to see what your character knows about this new thing.

When you call for a lore roll, you should identify what it is that the character might know something about. This should be something that's only just been introduced into the game. For example, if the characters are sailing into a foreign and exotic port, you could make a lore roll to see what your character knows about this city. Or if you've just been pounced upon by some hideous being from the nether-realms, you can make a lore roll to see if your character can remember some snippet of information about the beast.

Lore rolls always use the Sorcerer attribute, and you can also roll any appropriate abilities. This is where the Magic abilities discussed in the first chapter are useful. Roll your character's Sorcerer die, and any relevant abilities. The target number is four.

If your highest die is lower than the target number, your character doesn't know anything about the new thing introduced.

Winning Lore Rolls

If your highest die is four or more, then your character knows something about the new thing introduced. You get to create one item of lore about the new thing. Determine degree of success as normal (one degree of success for every two points you exceed the target number by). Spend degrees of success on:

- Extra items of lore
- A +1 bonus to a future action involving the new thing

Lore

"Lore" is what gets created by lore rolls. This is the stuff your character knows about the new thing. Lore is similar to the facts that players can create after winning conflicts, but with these differences:

- Lore must relate to the new thing that is introduced. You can't make a lore roll when you enter the Dark Citadel, and make up lore about the Caves of Torment.
- You must say how your character came by that item of lore. You can describe how they heard a rumour in a foreign land, read it in a book of forbidden secrets, remembered it from the legends of their people, or anything else that makes sense given the character and the lore they are remembering.

Each piece of lore should be a distinct fact. To create more elaborate histories, you must spend degrees of success to create additional pieces of lore. For example "My people tell stories of this beast. In the legends it is frightened of fire." is one piece of lore (plus a description of how the character came to know the lore). "It is written in the ancient tomes that these caves were home to creatures born of flame, guarding great treasures." is two pieces of lore, one for the "creatures of flame" and another for the "great treasures".

Lore is also how you introduce magical abilities into the game. Just introduce the particular magical effect that you want as a piece of lore.

For example "The great apes of this jungle are bound by ancient pacts (one piece of lore). Initiates of the Black Pits such as I may call on these pacts to command service of the apes (a second piece of lore)."

Morgance the Sea-Reaver, and her warrior companion Druce are sailing off the coast of a black isle. The GM describes sea-birds circling the craggy rocks, and as they round a headland, a rough-hewn tower of obsidian. Morgance's player calls for a Lore roll about the tower. The player takes an eight-sided die for Morgance's Sorcerer attribute, and a six-sider for her "well travelled" ability.

The player rolls, and gets a seven on her highest die. That's a win with one degree of success. The player speaks for Morgance:

"Aye! It is the Tower of The Hag Queen" (one piece of lore). "I heard a drunkard tell of it when he was deep in his cups. They say the plunder of a hundred years of piracy is hidden there!" (a second piece of lore)

Lore never guarantees winning a conflict. Even if you create a piece of lore that says "this monster is vulnerable to fire" you must still succeed at a conflict to hurt the creature with fire, and use the normal rules for injury. Lore of this kind can change the stakes of a conflict, or even make it so you don't have to roll dice at all, but they never change the rules of conflicts, and never let you automatically win.

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Zarathoon, Master of the Black Tower, is confronted by snake-men in a steamy, distant jungle. His player wins a Lore roll about the stinking swamp with three degrees of success. The player describes Zarathoon calling to his enemies: "Back, fiends, this swamp is home to the demon Irriqizz, Lord of Insects (one piece of lore). I have read of him in my books, and I know the chant that draws him near! (another piece of lore)" The player spends the last degree of success on a +1 bonus to summoning Irriqizz. This will be a dangerous conflict, using the Sorcerer attribute.

Summary

Lore Rolls:

- Call for a Lore conflict when the characters discover something new.
- Roll your character's Sorcerer attribute, plus any relevant ability dice.
- If your highest die is four or higher, you may create one piece of lore.
- For every degree of success, you get one extra piece of lore, or a +1 bonus to a future conflict.

Extra Material

On the following pages is some extra material for the game. Overleaf you'll find a set of tables that are designed to help give inspiration for players who might be more familiar with more traditional fantasy literature, rather than the pulp fantasy that informs On Mighty Thews. The left-hand columns give a common trope of mainstream fantasy literature, and the right-hand columns give several options for pulp-fantasy equivalents. There is also a table of names for people and places.
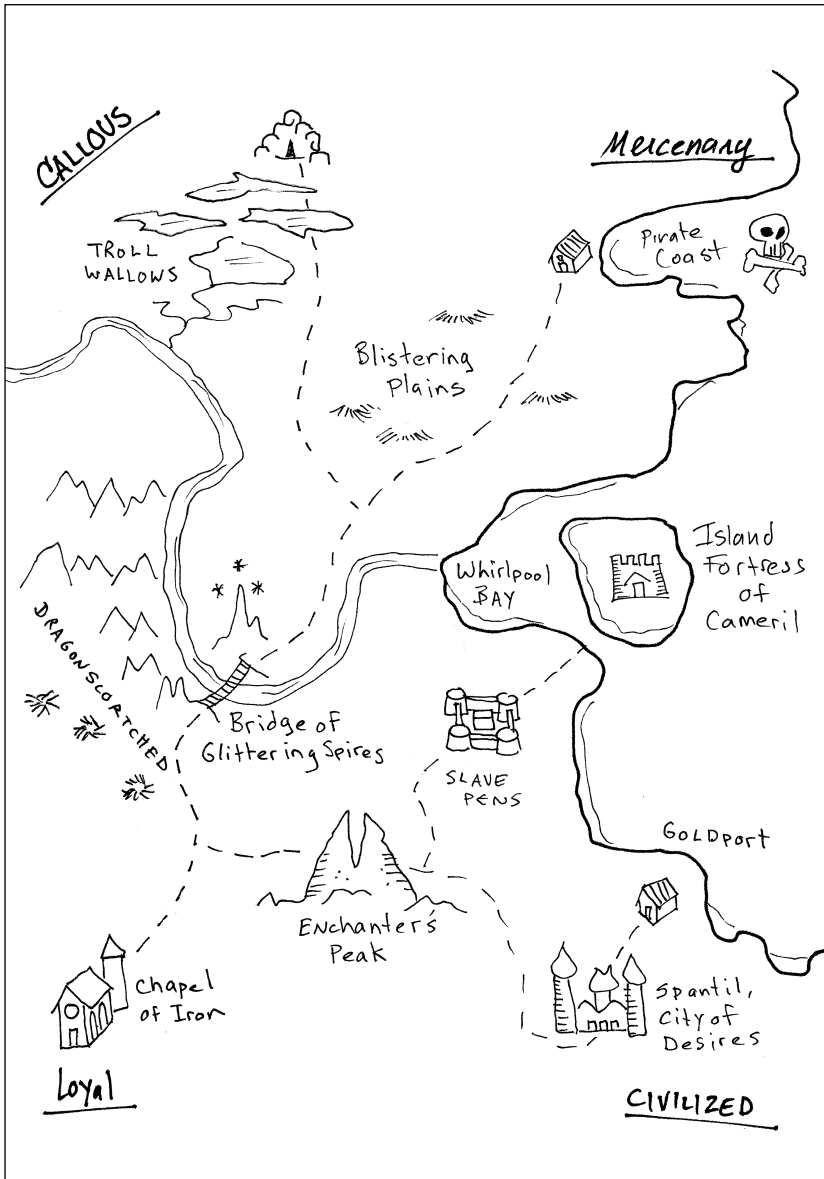
After the tables there are several example maps, showing the different scales and dimensions in which you can make a map for the game.

Finally, a character sheet is provided

Tavern	Bordello
	Gambling house
	Opium den
Horse	Camel
	Lizard-mount
	Riding-beetle
	Yak
Ale	Wine
	Moon-mead
	Hookah smoke
	Mushroom tea
	Liquors
	Dream-water
Deity	Demon Prince
	Cynical hoax
	Ancient horror
	Monstrous creature

Knight	Eagle-rider
	Eunuch warrior
	Deathseeker
	Spirit-slave
	War-witch
King	Potentate
	Arch-thief
	Tyrant
	God-king
Wizard	Godling
	Genius
	Immortal
	Alien being
Skeletons	Murderous ghouls
	Mirror apparitions
	Giggling specters
	Hungry shadows

Treasure	Neanderthal totem
	Elixir of immortality
	Fist-sized jewel
	Tome of secrets
	Naked slave-girl
	Intelligent artifact
Evil	Corrupt
	Ancient
	Alien
	Indifferent
Hero	Sell-sword
	Thief
	Adventurer
Queen	High Priestess
	Consort
	Demon familiar
	Vampiress

Names for People

Artemisia	Thuul	Livia
Thron	Changor	Feodore
Tusa	Zoya	Xenobia
Druce	Sosanna	Karam
Yasemin	Zahir	Tymon
Roshunda	Sharajsha	Jotun

Interesting Places

Yagati - City of Slaves
The Well of Delights
Anrok, the Gilded City
The Flesh Fields
Ioz - Land of Nightmare
Witches' Hearth
The Forgetting Mists
Lost Karakoram
The Wandering Isle

Village	Dungeon
Mercenary camp	Necropolis
Tent-city	Forbidden palace
Trade post	Sunken fortress
Scavenger town	Mirage-city
Ptera-folk aerie	Monolith
	Ancient temple
	Sky-barge

Orcs	Wolves
Mercenaries	Hyenas
Fanatical cultists	Lions
Fearless Amazons	Giant apes
Dispossessed bandits	Vampire bats
Rapacious pirates	
Renegade warriors	

Farmland	Humans
Rocky desert	Cat people
Tundra	Leech-women
Steaming jungle	Moon-folk
Ice wastes	Lizard kings
Glass sea	Maggot-men
Festering swamp	Claylings

CALLOUS

Mercenary

TROLL
WALLOWS

Pirate
Coast

Blistering
Plains

Island
Fortress
of
Cameril

DRAGONSCORTCHED

Whirlpool
BAY

Bridge of
Glittering Spires

SLAVE
PENS

GOLDport

Enchanter's
Peak

Chapel
of Iron

Spantil,
City of
Desires

Loyal

CIVILIZED

GATE OF WONDERS

Wrathful

Bone slum

GANGS

Mad King ELLOM

SAINT BEDLAM

Furnace of the War Cult

Imational

Devout

Star Tower

Locked Gate

District of One Thousand Gods

Stork Gate

Flesh Markets

ARENA

Courageous

THE GRAVE CITADEL

GATE OF STORMS

CITY of HARROW

PRIDE

SPIRE OF
THE RED
WIZARD

DOOM
HOUSE

Accursed
Laboratory

GHOUL
VILLAGE

FAMILY
VAULT

DEADLY
MURK

CLAW
LAIR

LOST
TREASURE
OF EB

GREED

GALVANIC
CHUTE

ORB OF
ELYS

CRYPT OF THE
GARGOYLE KING

LAVA
MAZE

ABYSS OF THE
BLACK SILENCE

THE
HELL
HIVE

FEAR

On Mighty Thews

Attributes

Warrior: (d4)   (d8)   (d12)

Sorcerer: (d4)   (d8)   (d12)

Explorer: (d4)   (d8)   (d12)

Abilities

_____   (d6)   (d10)

_____   (d6)   (d10)

d20 Trait

_____   (d20)

_____
Name

Bonuses

Re-rolls