The cover art features a large, white dragon with a red mouth and yellow eyes, flying through a misty, mountainous landscape. Two adventurers are riding on its back: a man in a yellow tunic and a woman in blue armor. The man is holding a glowing pink staff, and the woman is holding a sword. In the background, other dragons are visible, including one with a rider. The title 'FANTASY AGE' is written in large, golden, textured letters, with 'CAMPAIGN BUILDER'S GUIDE' in smaller, white, outlined letters below it.

# FANTASY AGE

## CAMPAIGN BUILDER'S GUIDE

DESIGNED BY GARY ASTLEFORD, WALT GIECHANOWSKI,  
RACHAEL CRUZ, STEVE KENSON, MATT MILLER, & JAMIE WOOD

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GREEN RONIN PUBLISHING  
3815 S. Othello St.  
Suite 100, #311  
Seattle, WA 98118  
[www.greenronin.com](http://www.greenronin.com)

PRINTED IN USA  
FIRST PRINTING



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# INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the *Fantasy AGE Campaign Builder's Guide*! Dedicated to assisting a Game Master with creating, building, maintaining, and running campaigns, this book is filled with advice on crafting encounters and adventures, creating interesting monsters and locations, running epic-style campaigns, and several other topics. Also included are several random tables to help GMs seeking inspiration for creating parts of their games.

While the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and the *Fantasy AGE Companion* in the *Fantasy AGE* line have utility for both players and GMs, the *Campaign Builder's Guide* is more akin to the previously released *Fantasy AGE Bestiary*, in that it is largely a book for Game Masters. Players will hopefully find the advice here interesting and possibly inspirational, but it is primarily aimed at those running campaigns.

## WHAT THIS BOOK IS

Each chapter of this book is devoted to a different topic important to creating and running a campaign. The first part of each chapter covers general concepts and advice, providing examples when necessary. Each chapter then includes a specific example designed using the advice and guidance of the text. For example, the topic of our first chapter is campaign frameworks. The chapter covers common frameworks for campaigns, how to make and tweak frameworks for various play styles and groups, and how to generally use frameworks to enhance but not limit play experiences. At the end of the chapter, the reader is introduced to a particular framework chosen and designed using the substance of the chapter.

This model is followed throughout the book, guiding the reader on how to craft effective and interesting campaigns. The chapters of this book are:

- **Building Campaign Frameworks**
- **Building the Adventure**
- **Building Encounters**
- **Building Locations**
- **Building Characters**
- **Building Rewards**
- **Building Monsters & Adversaries**
- **Building the Divine**
- **Building Subgenres**
- **Building Epic Campaigns**

Also throughout the book are numerous random tables designed to help GMs generate campaign elements. You can

roll on these tables and take the exact results, pick and choose elements from them as desired, or use them as inspiration for your own creations.

## WHAT THIS BOOK ISN'T

While there are rules and mechanical options explored in this book, it is not a rulebook. It's a guide for GMs to make campaigns. This involves and is affected by the rules for *Fantasy AGE*, but the purpose of the *Campaign Builder's Guide* isn't to provide dozens of new rules to process and remember. Instead, the goal is to help GMs and players better use the rules and elements that already exist within the game, adding only when necessary. The writers of this book were selected for their expertise in the topics they cover. This helps ensure their insight is valuable and useful to the majority of readers.

This approach, as well as a focus on advice for GMs of all skill and experience levels, means that not every piece of advice or section will be equally useful to everyone. Some of the more basic advice will prove invaluable to new GMs or those with experience in only non-*Fantasy AGE* games. Other advice is most useful to GMs already well versed in running *Fantasy AGE* or with robust GM experience. Like so many things, much of the text in this book is aimed at the middle of these extremes, with solid advice and guidance for GMs of all backgrounds, while some advice may seem obvious to some and revelatory to others.

## NOT JUST FOR CAMPAIGNS

While much of the advice in this book is written to help GMs with their campaigns, much of it also has utility outside of the campaign. Chapters on adversary design, character design, location creation, genre, and other concepts are of great use in designing one-shots and convention games. Every GM will need to create encounters and adventures for their games, making the chapters on those topics universally useful. Even campaign-focused chapters such as those discussing epic play are useful when a one-shot or short adventure series seeks to invoke an epic feel.

### SQUAD GOALS: THE CAMPAIGN WAR STORY

A reliable indicator that a campaign is working is the "war story." This isn't necessarily a story about an actual war or conflict in a game, but a detailed, often embellished tale of the results of a particularly successful campaign. Older gamers likely already possess several war stories about their best campaigns. Newer players, excited by the experience of gaming, quickly find their own stories. In that way, these experiences bring groups together and keep the social aspect of gaming flourishing. In a way, experiencing these stories by proxy is at the heart of many popular online tabletop roleplaying game streams and podcasts, where thousands of fans tune in to see campaigns unfold.

Thus war stories are important. They might occasionally be a bit daunting or cryptic to those outside the games and the teller of the tale should always gauge their audience for interest and investment. But well told war stories and the games that spawn them can attract new gamers, keep players invested, and even create social bonds outside the game. These aren't the goal, which is just to tell amusing anecdotes and relate fun experiences, but those other happenings are a nice bonus.

So how does this connect to this book? Simply put, you can't have war stories without good sessions and campaigns. Without the well-destined NPCs? It's hard to have a great moment with them. Without the noteworthy monster? Battling them is less likely to become part of an oft-related story about the game.

## A FEW NOTES ON PROBABILITIES

When creating your own tables involving multiple dice, remember different totals have different likelihoods of coming up. Mathematically speaking, 2d6 form a triangular probability plot and 3d6 form a bell curve, where the totals in the middle of the range are more likely to come up than the totals on the high and low ends. This effect becomes more extreme the more dice you add.

### 2D6 PROBABILITIES

2D6 RESULT	COMBINATIONS	PROBABILITY
2 and 12	1	1/36 or 2.77%
3 and 11	2	1/18 or 5.55%
4 and 10	3	1/12 or 8.33%
5 and 9	4	1/9 or 11.11%
6 and 8	5	5/36 or 13.88%
7	6	1/6 or 16.66%

### 3D6 PROBABILITIES

3D6 RESULT	COMBINATIONS	PROBABILITY	PROBABILITY OF SP
3 and 18	1	1/216 or 0.46%	100%
4 and 17	3	1/72 or 1.38%	100%
5 and 16	6	1/36 or 2.77%	100%
6 and 15	10	5/108 or 4.62%	40%
7 and 14	15	5/72 or 6.94%	60%
8 and 13	21	7/72 or 9.72%	42.86%
9 and 12	25	25/216 or 11.57%	28%
10 and 11	27	1/8 or 12.5%	33.33%

The probability of generating stunt points doesn't make as tidy a chart, but it's worth looking at if you intend your own tables to have effects related to rolling doubles. The rolls on the low and high ends of the spectrum are guaranteed to always include doubles, but have a much smaller range of possible SP values.

### STUNT POINT PROBABILITIES

3D6 RESULT	PROBABILITY	MIN SP	MAX SP
3	100%	1	1
4	100%	1	2
5	100%	1	3
6	40%	1	4
7	60%	1	5
8	43%	1	6
9	28%	1	5
10	33%	2	6
11	33%	1	5
12	28%	2	6
13	43%	1	6
14	60%	2	6
15	40%	3	6
16	100%	4	6
17	100%	5	6
18	100%	6	6

Overall, there is a 44.44% chance of rolling doubles on 3d6, but this doesn't mean 44.44% of rolls will result in stunt points, since the test must be successful in order for stunt points to be generated.

## CAMPAIGN SIGNIFICANCE

*Fantasy AGE*, like most role-playing games, runs well both as a one-shot game and as an ongoing campaign. Since *Fantasy AGE* is a level-based game that provides detailed rules for advancement, it is arguably more campaign-focused, making guidance for campaign creation and running important.

So why are campaigns important? Simply put, campaigns enable extended play and elaborate stories created through experiences at the table. A one-shot can be memorable and enjoyable, but campaigns allow characters and settings to develop in ways they cannot in a single session lasting only a few hours.

Some stories simply cannot be told without a campaign. Games emulating most of the great fantasy stories are among these. Likewise, stories with several important characters and locations, or adversaries meant to be encountered but defeated at a later time, require a campaign. There is no "long game" in a one-shot, but in a campaign, the GM can set up ideas, plots, and events that don't pay off or resolve until much later. This isn't desirable in every encounter or adventure, but the option to do so makes for powerful and effective storytelling.

From a mechanical standpoint, campaigns are also where characters develop over time. Unless a one-shot involves time jumps and is exceptionally long, players are unlikely to level up their characters, decide which talents and specializations

best suit their concepts, or evolve their concepts and characters over time.

## ONE FINAL WORD

A lot of this sounds super serious and perhaps a bit intimidating—especially to newer GMs. You're holding this big book and it's filled with all this stuff and it's perched on your imposter syndrome ("I can't run a game! What are you talking about?") like a gargoyle, or just looks like too much to absorb ("I'll never keep this all straight!").

Don't worry about it. You can do this. This all is just here to help. If part of it isn't helping? Don't worry about it. Toss what you don't want and use the rest. If you've got a different way of doing something that works for you? Fantastic. That's how it should be. This book is a good map, but it's not going to tell you which roads to take if you want a more direct or more scenic journey.

The truth is that Game Masters come in all forms. From the 11-year-old running for her friends to old folks who have gamed for decades, there is no "real gamer." There is no "real GM."

If you want to run a game? Do it.

We hope this book helps.



## BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

**W**hen starting a new *Fantasy AGE* campaign, you'll need to consider the kinds of adventures that your players are expected to have and how they can design their characters to suit those adventures. The best way to do that is through a guiding theme, or framework, that helps you shape your adventures and craft an internally consistent world.

We're going to assume that you've read the advice given in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and consulted your players, so you have some idea about the basics of your fantasy world and the overall style of campaign you wish to run (such as ancient Mesopotamian dark fantasy, feudal samurai horror, or swashbuckling pirates). With these building blocks in place, it's time to start thinking about how to craft your framework.

### USING FRAMEWORKS

A campaign framework is the foundation on which you build your adventures and overall campaign arc. It acts like the skeleton on which the body of your campaign is built. A good framework tells the players where they are starting and what kinds of challenges they are going to face over the course of a campaign. A good framework also gives you, the GM, some sense of where the campaign is headed and how to challenge your PCs along the way.

Here are some basic steps you can follow to create a campaign framework.

### CHOOSE A THEME

A theme is a distillation of the campaign world, the campaign style, and your discussion with the players. While the world tells you and the players where the characters are and the style tells them what kind of adventures they might expect, the campaign theme tells them exactly what it is that they are expected to do.

In some cases, your initial discussion and thoughts on the world may already give you a theme. If your players indicated a desire to play in a pirate campaign and you've decided to use the Freeport setting, then you've probably got high-seas adventure on your mind (although not necessarily; your players may want to spend most of their time in the city rather than sailing across the ocean).

The stronger the theme, the easier it is for players to design characters that fit the theme. For example, if you tell your players that the campaign theme involves a war-torn dark-fantasy setting with the protagonists as ruthless mercenaries willing to sell their swords to the highest bidder, then you probably aren't going to get too many kind-hearted priests, lovable dashing rogues, or warriors with hearts of gold as character concepts.

### KNOW YOUR PLAYERS

While you've hopefully already had a discussion with your players about the nature of your upcoming campaign (and,

It doesn't matter how thorough your initial conversation with your players is or how specific you are when conveying the elements of your campaign framework. Invariably during character creation, there's going to be someone who wants to play something outside the lines. It happens, and it is one of the great things about collaborative roleplaying games—you can color outside the box.

The knee-jerk reaction is often to shut the player down by saying “no.” There are many legitimate reasons for this—adding a ninja is going to ruin the verisimilitude of your Dark Ages Europe framework, you really didn't want firearms in your fantasy setting, or no one in the characters' corner of the Caliphate has ever seen an elf—and the players aren't going to blame you for sticking to the framework. Still, something has sparked a player's interest, and it's a shame to lose that.

Consider instead giving a qualified “yes.” With a little effort, almost any character concept can be massaged to fit within your framework. Maybe a ninja is too far flung and anachronistic for the Dark Ages, but an assassin from a distant land with uncommon customs certainly wouldn't be, and maybe they were chosen for this mission because they could blend in. Perhaps the character is on the cutting edge of firearms technology and has made the first working firearm, or has discovered a magical formula that imitates (or improves!) gunpowder. Or perhaps there really is an elf in that corner of the Caliphate, but they've either been disguising themselves (with the eponymous focus) to look human all this time, or they have just enough human blood in their ancestry to allow them to pass as human.

Saying “yes” not only rewards the creativity and enthusiasm of your players, but it may also give you new ideas to add to your campaign. Why is there an assassin in your Dark Age village? Is someone else interested in the secrets of gunpowder, and what would they do to acquire it? What happens when the elf's true nature is discovered?

if you haven't, do so—now!), it's one thing to hear what they want and another to know what they want. If you want to increase your chances of having a successful campaign, then you're going to want to anticipate your players' desires whether they've vocalized them or not.

If you've gamed with any one player for any length of time, you probably have a good idea as to what they want. If they really enjoy mowing down the opposition and pushing the combat rules to their limit, then even if they tell you that they want to play in a game of courtly intrigue, you'd still better make sure to build in frequent combat encounters!

There are many reasons why a player's stated desires and actual desires don't jibe. Some players may believe that certain elements of a game are simply “baked in,” such as regular combats, and therefore don't feel the need to ask for them. Others may not be aware of their own proclivities or, worse, believe that their fellow players would make fun of them for asking for what they really want. Still others may not know what they want and simply nod their heads to go with the flow.

This discussion is also a good time to take stock of any “problem players” in the group and ways in which you might incorporate them into your campaign. You probably aren't going to want to rely on your griever to help maintain a delicate political balance amongst opposing sides, nor is your hack-n-slasher going to be too happy if you don't weave a combat or two into every session. You'll want to keep your campaign moving at a brisk pace if you have a motivator, and you'll need regular roleplaying scenes to accommodate your character thespian.

### START WITH THE END

If you've played a lot of roleplaying games, this advice may seem rather odd, as a GM's plans rarely survive contact with the players, and there's a good chance that the campaign may fizzle before reaching its endpoint. Still, having some idea of

where you think the campaign is going to end can be a huge help as you shape the rest of the campaign.

The more details you can provide for your campaign's ending, the better. Again, this may seem counterintuitive given the likelihood that your conceived ending may not come to pass, but the more detailed your vision, the easier it is to work backwards. “Taking the fight to the Daemon Lady” is okay, “Cutting through the powerful daemonic protectors of the Daemon Lady in her mountain fortress” is better, and “Cutting through the powerful daemonic protectors of the Daemon Lady in her mountain fortress on an island surrounded by treacherous waters during a raging storm on the night of a new moon—when she is at her most vulnerable” is even better.

The last example, in addition to providing a clearer picture, adds plot-related questions that can be used to build out the framework. It seems very difficult to get to the Daemon Lady on a night when she's at her weakest. Is this island her regular retreat for protection? How strong is she otherwise, and what other limits exist on her power? Do the heroes need to discover the location of this island and, if so, how? What obstacles would the Daemon Lady put in their way to keep this information secret?

### WORK YOUR WAY BACKWARDS

Once you've decided on an ending for your campaign, you'll want to work your way backwards to get to the characters. Ask yourself what avenues might project from your end scene and potentially call to a party of adventurers. Everything starts with that ending scene and the final adversary involved within it.

This is a good time to get into the head of your final adversary. What kind of a villain are they? What is their ultimate goal and how do they go about acquiring it? Do they prefer to do the dirty work themselves, or do they rely on minions? What kinds of henchmen and minions do they recruit? Have they

directly or indirectly involved other villains with their own motivations? Do they even consider themselves a villain?

Once you better understand your final adversary, you can start mapping out their schemes and how they fall back to that final scene. For example, if you envision your final scene taking place in the throne room just as the villain is about to be crowned Overking of the Four Kingdoms, it seems likely that your players didn't realize he was a threat until he'd acquired what he wanted. This suggests that Future Overking is a careful schemer and may have even involved the heroes in his schemes. He likely used them to bring down his rivals, and only when those rivals were toppled could he seize power.

This leads to several questions, the most obvious being why Future Overking's coronation is a bad thing. The answer is probably something immediate, since Future Overking turning out to be a terrible ruler isn't going to show itself quickly enough for that coronation to be the end scene. Perhaps all Overkings have a sacred duty to protect the key to a locked universe and Future Overking is about to use his power to unlock it and let a powerful enemy in.

With this plan in mind, Future Overking needs to eliminate his rivals. He is probably one of the rulers of the Four Kingdoms, so that leaves three rivals to knock out. As it is unlikely that all the other kings are of sterling character, it may be easy for Future Overking to bait the characters into helping him eliminate an obviously bad rival. It's only when the heroes discover that one of the rivals they are undermining is actually a decent queen—and the evidence planted—that they begin to discover Future Overking's plan. At the very least, they should uncover what motivates Future Overking's betrayal of the characters' trust during the campaign.

A final but very important element to consider when working one's way backwards is how long the avenues run. *Fantasy AGE* is designed for characters to climb 20 levels, but your campaign may not span that long. If not, then you're either going to have to adjust the characters' starting level to reach that of the final adversary or lower the threat of the final adversary to align with where the characters will likely end up. This will be easier to do in some cases than in others. In a high-fantasy campaign, having a 6th-level Overking is going to stretch credibility; in a dark-fantasy or low-fantasy campaign, however, this may seem much more reasonable.

## THE CHALLENGES OF THE ROAD

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Now that you know your final adversary and their various machinations, it's time to flesh out the types of challenges that the heroes are going to face along the way. Such challenges tend to fall into three types—combat, exploration, and roleplaying—but the frequency and quality of these challenges will vary based on the needs of your framework.

Combat challenges are often amongst the most frequent and anticipated encounters in fantasy campaigns, as all players expect to fight adversaries at least once a session, and every class has combat abilities to some extent. If your campaign takes place during a war or involves exploring dangerous ruins, your players will expect a lot of combat; less so in a campaign based around political intrigue or solving mysteries.

Consider your rogues' gallery at this point. What kinds of minions is your final adversary likely to employ? Does your adversary work through henchmen or lieutenants (or both!) that your characters are likely to encounter, and what abilities will they have? What other adversaries or creatures are you likely to throw at them?

Exploration challenges are those that involve obstacles to overcome. Classic exploration challenges include the puzzle and the trap (or even the puzzle trap), which involve the heroes using certain focuses or their own wits to find their way around them. Picking a lock is an exploration challenge; so is piecing together evidence to solve a mystery.

Roleplaying challenges are those that involve social interactions between PCs and GM-controlled characters, whether adversaries (those opposed or potentially opposed to the PCs) or supporting characters (everyone else). Roleplaying challenges combine roleplay and focus tests; the amount of each largely depends on your group's preference (and may vary from player to player).

How you plan to run roleplaying challenges will have a big impact on the players. On one extreme, if they know that talking a good game will get them through any encounter, they will be less likely to select focuses and talents to help them through such challenges. On the other hand, if you simply have your players make ability tests for everything, then you risk turning off players who like to roleplay.

## A CALL TO ADVENTURE

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Now that you've worked your way back through your framework, it's time to start at the beginning. This is where the characters get involved. Look at your various threads, adversaries, and challenges and decide where you want your players to start. You're now ready to help them through character generation.

No matter how much time you've put into designing your framework, the biggest emotional investment your players are going to have is in designing their own characters. While *Fantasy AGE* has only three character classes, the players still have several decisions to make beyond covering the bases. Does your framework limit the availability of particular races and backgrounds? What focuses, talents, and spells should you encourage? What specializations should your players be gravitating towards?

When guiding your players, it's best to encourage rather than dictate. These are, after all, the players' characters, and they should feel free to make their own choices. It's okay to point out that certain focuses or talents may be less useful than others, but fortunately most are broad enough to be applicable at least some of the time.

This is also a good time to determine whether you and your players are on the same page regarding the campaign. If you find yourself barely needing to advise them during character generation, then chances are they understand the needs of your framework. On the other hand, if your players are making particularly inappropriate characters (such as a pirate crew for your courtly intrigue campaign) then you may need to have another group discussion about the campaign before continuing!



# CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK EXAMPLES

Here are a few examples of campaign frameworks. These are drawn as broadly as possible to work with any game worlds and campaign styles that you want to use, although some fit better on particular worlds or within particular styles than others. A more detailed example of a campaign framework is given at the end of this chapter.

## MERCENARIES

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The protagonists are part of a mercenary company that uses its name and reputation to attract missions for coin. The heroes may operate out of a single major city or they may be a traveling band, and the types of missions that they attract depend upon their own skill set. They may be a band of warriors, a crack team of infiltrators, or perhaps noted for possessing certain talents and abilities that are rare in their part of the world. This last option works particularly well if the characters have access to magic or technologies beyond what the locals are capable of fielding, or for an exotic twist, the heroes may be afflicted with some dark power or curse, such as lycanthropy, that grants them special abilities.

Mercenary companies tend to collect those foreign to the lands in which they offer their services. Such companies are especially desirable because they are perceived to have no ties to the locals that might get in the way of their duties. An unpopular lord may rely almost entirely on such mercenaries, as he may not trust any of his own warriors! In some fantasy settings, a mercenary band may be truly exotic—the adventurers may be a band of mostly human mercenaries operating in elven lands, or they may be a group of gnomes and orcs specializing in night attacks.

The players should come up with a descriptive name for their group. They also need to decide whether they are purely (excuse the pun) “mercenary,” or if there are limits to the types of jobs they can or will take. A band of mercenary pirates, for example, may have a letter of marque that protects them from a particular nation with the understanding that they cannot attack that nation’s ships. A good campaign framework should help guide the players in the development of their mercenary band.

One thing to remember about mercenary companies is that they are often hired by individuals looking for plausible deniability or someone who needs experienced sword hands beyond the local farmers and yeomanry. This means that the protagonists are considered dangerous, uncivilized, and removable when inconvenient. Much roleplaying can be mined as the characters’ mere presence agitates those they’ve been hired to protect or when their antics have started to give their employer a bad reputation.

As the campaign marches forward, the heroes should discover that their mercenary activities are getting them into big trouble. Maybe one of their employers misrepresented herself or the mission, and the characters find themselves on the wrong side of the law or acting in the interests of some dark god. Or maybe a powerful evil is unleashed in the world because in one of

their early missions, the adventurers inadvertently removed the obstacle that was keeping the evil at bay. In both cases, much fun can be had as the heroes try to undo their mistakes and salvage their reputation in the process.

## HIGH-SEAS ADVENTURE

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The characters are pirates or privateers making a living in international waters. They likely have one ship they call their own and usually raid other ships or explore forgotten lands in search of treasure. The crew can be as diverse or uniform as they desire; some privateer crews hail from a single nation, while others are a motley crew of diverse backgrounds drawn from wherever the ship happens to anchor. High-seas characters are generally in it for the money, whether raiding foreign vessels in the service of a queen, seeking treasures lost to time or Davey Jones, or just raiding unsuspecting vessels as the opportunity presents itself.

Like characters in the mercenary campaign, pirates and privateers rely on their reputation to intimidate their prey, although in this case the reputation belongs to their ship. The ship’s name should be evocative, frightening, and instantly recognizable by the flag the characters unfurl (this last bit is especially important—ships tend to sink, but the flag can be transferred from vessel to vessel). Reputation is also important when the players are looking for work; no one wants to hire a pirate crew that has a reputation for turning on its patrons!

What differentiates this campaign from other banditry or mercenary campaigns is the environment. The ocean is a very unforgiving place—one bad storm could drown or shipwreck an unwary or unlucky crew. The sea itself is also a source of adventure: mythology, the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary*, and other monstrous sources include numerous creatures and beasts that might be rarely used if your campaigns are landlocked. The High-Seas Adventure campaign offers an opportunity to dust off these creatures and provide new challenges and opportunities for your players, such as merfolk characters or were-sharks threatening a ship’s crew where there is nowhere to run and hide!

A High-Seas Adventure campaign is also a good place to scatter the remnants of previous civilizations or even functioning modern ones, from the mundane (the ruins of a “classical” city that sank when the waters rose) to the fantastic (a modern underwater city kept functioning by a magic dome that lets creatures in and out while converting water to breathable air).

Wherever you set your campaign, you’ll probably want to establish one or more “free ports” where the heroes can rest, heal, resupply, dispose of booty, and make themselves available for hire without fear of arrest. Such ports offer opportunities for adventure that let the characters stretch their legs a bit off their vessels. *The Pirate’s Guide to Freeport* is an excellent resource for a fantasy version of a pirate city.

While the “Golden Age of Piracy” is a tough image to shake, you need not set your campaign in an analogue of the Caribbean at the turn of the eighteenth century, nor do you need to include firearms in your campaign. High-seas adventure is as old as sea-worthy ships and pirates have been a constant threat since, especially along valuable trade routes and rich but isolated port cities.



## THE WASTELAND

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The characters operate in a blasted landscape that was once home to a mighty empire. What was once a beautiful landscape filled with castles and cities is now a barren waste. It may be a hot and sandy desert, a frigid tundra, or an overgrown jungle; more exotic options include a sunken continent or a region still plagued by the aftereffects of a magical mishap. The heroes travel this wasteland, scavenging forgotten treasures or helping others navigate through it.

Wasteland campaigns work best when there is a clear difference between “the world that was” and “the world that is.” Maybe a wayward comet or dimensional rift brought, in addition to widespread destruction, new races or enemies. How would the characters—or society at large—treat a dwarf character if the dwarves came to the world along with the fell creatures that are now destroying it? Do they blame the dwarves for their world’s destruction?

The technology, magic, and cultures of the pre-wasted world could be very different from what the protagonists have access to now. Perhaps the previous empire was Romanesque, which means most of the magic items lost in the wastes are of Roman design. A plate-clad warrior trained with a longsword and medium shield may find herself struggling to wear segmented armor while wielding a pilum and a heavy rectangular shield because those were the only magic weapons and armor she found! Similarly, the common tongue of the old empire might not be the current one, making all of those old books and scrolls difficult to read without assistance or special training.

If you don’t mind mixing genres a little, this framework works well as a science-fantasy setting. The wasteland could be our own Earth after some cataclysm (a comet, global thermonuclear war, the zombie plague) devastated it. Magic in such a setting might be nanotechnology that only secretive “mage orders” know how to manipulate (whether they understand it themselves or they’re simply following the arcane and enigmatic instructions of their forebears), and the other races and many of the strange creatures could be the results of the cataclysm directly (radiation or genetic manipulation before or after said cataclysm) or of evolution due to the changes wrought by the cataclysm.

Such a setting could incorporate as little or as much pre-cataclysmic stuff as you want. There could be a lot of echoes to the past (the hereditary ruler of a former American state may call herself “Governor” instead of “Queen,” or the direct routes connecting several Germanic states look a lot like a modern railway map, even if the rails are long gone), or so much time could have passed and records been lost that the game world looks a lot like any other pseudo-medieval fantasy setting, with only an occasional ruin or artifact to hint at the world that was before. This latter approach works well if the cataclysm fundamentally changed the world, such as changing the axial tilt so that the arctic circle is bisected by the equator and Antarctica is habitable, or the cataclysm managed to somehow sink continents and raise others.

## A GAME OF FIEFS

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Not all campaigns need to span a continent or even a kingdom; thrilling adventures can be run without the characters ever

leaving their base of operations. In this campaign framework, the protagonists are part of a noble household—as nobles themselves, part of the family, or loyal retainers—that is plunged into the world of feudal intrigue. They are expected to forge alliances, keep the peace, and combat threats from both without and within. In such campaigns, a character's skills at negotiation and strategy can far outweigh her ability to draw a bow or swing a blade (although such talents have their place as well, especially under the cloak of darkness!).

Such campaigns work best when there is an imminent threat that shakes the noble class. This could be a threat from within, such as a strong monarch who is squeezing the nobility to the breaking point or a weak or absent monarch inviting civil war. Alternatively, it could be an external threat, such as a rival nation threatening invasion, an impending creature onslaught, or a war with the potential to drag the heroes' nation into it.

With an overarching theme in mind, it's time to focus on the barony and its immediate neighbors. Are the local nobles on the heroes' side or are they looking for opportunities? Can they trust their allies as little as their enemies? Are there potential alliances to be made—and at what cost? Is there anyone inside the barony who threatens its stability?

In addition, don't forget about the day-to-day life of a barony. While the intrigues will always be swirling, there should still be the occasional bandit band or dangerous beast to overcome. Traveling circuses, traders, and noble visitors also come with opportunities for adventure, whether as interesting roleplaying encounters or something more nefarious. Don't forget the weather and natural phenomena; a bad harvest, a brutal winter, or the rising flood of a major storm can provide interesting challenges and even threaten to change the status quo amongst noble neighbors!

A word of caution with a Game of Fiefs campaign—if you are handing out titles to some or all of your players and creating a hierarchy, then you risk threatening party unity. While this can be fun and is part and parcel of a Game of Fiefs, it can make for a very short campaign, as well as hurt feelings, once the backstabbing starts. Be sure to take the measure of your players and steer things in a direction that makes such a campaign fun for all.

## GUTTERS & GUILDS

One need not scour the countryside for interesting encounters; plenty of adventures can be found within a city's walls. A Gutters and Guilds campaign takes place almost entirely within the confines of a single city, as the heroes are specialists tasked with performing certain jobs—legal and illegal—for their patrons. Often employers and victims alike are cut from the same cloth, neither being more or less sympathetic than the other. The protagonists often find themselves questioning whose side they're on and whether they should change allegiances or honor a suddenly less-than-palatable contract. Characters are often motivated by greed, opportunity, or circumstance; some may care little about who they work for so long as they get paid, while others tend to support causes or guilds.

Gutters and Guilds campaigns may seem to favor rogues, but in fact all classes are equally at home in this framework. Rogues may be tasked with carrying out a plan, but they'll need muscle—both physical and magical—to back them up when things go wrong or to overcome obstacles.

Such campaigns often involve a catalogue of contacts with specialties that are useful to the characters: everything from the barmaid who hears everything to the architect of the city sewers to the well-connected city clerk. Some of these contacts could also be friends and potential employers for future adventures.



Not all campaigns have to have a campaign framework. Some GMs feel comfortable creating a “sandbox,” a campaign that allows the players to create any characters they want and interact with the world in any way they see fit. The GM still defines the boundaries of the setting (the sandbox walls) and everything within that setting (the toys in the sandbox), but so long as the PCs remain within the sandbox and interact with the toys, enjoyable stories can be told!

A classic – perhaps *the* classic – fantasy RPG sandbox campaign is the “party of adventurers” who basically walk the world in search of fame and fortune. Characters are randomly generated with the approach of letting the chips fall where they may, and the players determine the party’s direction based on the resources at hand and their own interest in exploring new places in search of treasure and adventure. The GM is expected to create a setting that offers interesting avenues for the adventurers to explore, but never force them in any particular direction.

Not all sandboxes need be expansive. A GM might focus on a single fief, village, or city and populate it with interesting plots and supporting characters that the heroes can interact with or pursue at their leisure. Perhaps a creature is influencing a prominent family, an evil cult is trying to summon some horror from beyond, the village is threatened by an outside menace, and a bored noble craves excitement outside the confines of his daily life. The heroes can interact with any of these threads or even create their own as they forge relationships with the locals and try to make a life for themselves within the sandbox.

Gutters and Guilds campaigns often work best when each mission involves a devil’s bargain, meaning that the characters lose something to gain something. Perhaps completing a mission for a particular guild topples a good-hearted administrator and replaces her with a tyrant. Perhaps the heroes need to betray a loyal contact for the greater “good.” Or perhaps the characters complete a mission only to discover that their employer wasn’t forthcoming with some rather unsavory details that are now attributed to them!

Obviously, such a campaign requires a city large enough to support several factions and adventuring parties. Freeport works well as such a city, as do Denerim and the city-state of Nestora (from *Dragon Age RPG* and *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana*, respectively). Whether using such a city or designing your own, you’ll want to make sure that every political system, guild, and religion is factionalized to give your players allies and adversaries (who may change sides at the drop of a hat) to work with. Even if a particular group seems unified, you can always create tension within the group that could develop into opportunities for the characters.

For example, if the vast majority of your city’s residents belong to a monotheistic Church of Divine Light, then any rival religions that don’t venerate the one true Goddess aren’t likely to last long. Within the church, however, there could be two factions, a traditional wing and a reformist wing, that are vying for the affection of the people. Each wing likely supports particular guilds and political figures sympathetic to its cause. The priests of the order may be forbidden from attacking each other, but that only means that there is a market for deniable and disposable characters.

## BLADES AGAINST THE HORRORS

In a typical *Fantasy AGE* campaign, much of the fantastic may seem downright mundane, as even country farmers and villagers know about things like other races, magic, and strange creatures. Even an isolated human village, for example, may have a halfling family or two living among them, a local mage providing healing magic, and the constant threat of a nearby giant spider nest. Adventurers are recruited not because no one understands these things, but simply because no one else has the power to stop them.

But that need not be the case. Under this campaign framework, the game world is largely pseudo-historical; there are no fantastic elements – at least not in everyday life. The main threats to people in everyday life are hostile animals, the elements, disease, and each other. Elves may exist in the game world, but no one outside of a major port city could actually claim to have met one, and the legends of elves could be highly inaccurate (“You can’t be an elf! Elves are six inches tall and blue. Everybody knows that!”).

When people do confront the arcane and the preternatural, they do so with fear and terror. Normal people can’t perform magic, so anyone who can is obviously in league with a dark power or has made some dread bargain that gnaws at her soul. Even accepting something as innocuous as a healing spell may be perceived to come with certain conditions, such that a dying man may refuse healing for fear of losing his soul. Religion holds powerful sway in such campaigns, as the people put their faith in gods to protect them and tend to view any incursion by strange creatures as a judgment against their faith. Such a populace would do anything to regain their gods’ favor, a fact exploited by unscrupulous priests and opportunistic mages.

The heroes in this campaign are amongst the only characters who can stand against such preternatural threats. Legends of their prowess precede them, and those who would hire them do so with great suspicion; they are afraid of inviting demons in to deal with other demons, especially if some or all of the protagonists aren’t human (or whatever the default race is in that particular community). Mage characters are particularly feared and best cloak their abilities under the veils of piety or charlatanism – the people would rather seek help from a holy woman or a stage illusionist than a potent mage.

This type of campaign relies heavily on atmosphere and verisimilitude; without the ubiquity of magic and fantastic creatures to entertain and pique your players’ interest, you are going to have to immerse them in the world. Pick a historical era and run with it; the players should really feel like their characters are visiting a city-state in ancient Greece or exploring a village under the sway of the Aztec Empire, even if your game world is only loosely modeled on these cultures.

Blades against the Horrors campaigns also work best in isolated locales. If your game world resembles the Roman Empire, don't set your adventures in Rome; put your heroes in a remote town on the nebulous empire's border. Select adversaries and beasts that really sell the region. Villagers in a remote part of medieval Eastern Europe fear very different things than villagers on a mountain in feudal Japan.

## CRY FREEDOM!

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This campaign begins with the heroes-to-be under the thumb of some seemingly ruthless empire. While they aren't necessarily prisoners, they nevertheless feel a need to rebel and overthrow their oppressors. The main thrust of a Cry Freedom campaign is to offer opportunities for the characters to work against their "masters" and eventually strike a mortal blow that frees their part of the world for good.

From the players' point of view, one of the fun things about working against an evil empire is that those who wish to overthrow the government aren't particularly choosy about who does it. Thus the characters need not be altruistic freedom fighters (although you should certainly encourage at least one or more "true believers" in the party), but could be criminals, exiles, mercenaries, or ne'er-do-wells who see opportunity in this conflict. They may be looking for personal reward or redemption for past misdeeds. In either case, the rebellion is glad to have them so long as they use their talents and abilities against the greater threat.

Cry Freedom adventures can involve direct and indirect actions against the empire. The heroes may acquire and shepherd resources to resistance cells, recruit new allies, or free political prisoners so they can continue the fight. They may also strike against the empire directly, discrediting or removing problematic local government officials or even raising an army that can threaten the imperial forces—or at least encourage them to loosen their grip on the local community.

While Cry Freedom campaigns are often cast in black and white, you can opt to make things more morally gray. Perhaps the imperials don't see themselves as oppressors—they might be protecting the locals from a greater threat or trying to preserve their culture as best they can. They may even see themselves as liberators if the local government previously permitted (whether real or imagined) unconscionable practices. Or they could simply be members of another race or culture that has very different values than the one they've conquered—and they may not even realize they are conquerors! The heroes in such situations could find themselves torn between sides or even ultimately working for the empire (though you'll need to be careful with this approach, or you run the risk of your campaign being perceived as putting a stamp of approval on colonial oppression).

## THE QUEST

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In this classic campaign framework, the characters are called together to participate in a grand quest. Something epic must be accomplished during the campaign, and it's likely to have repercussions throughout the game world. A powerful adversary may threaten to conquer or lay waste to the lands unless the heroes can stop them, usually

through a combination of growing power and the acquisition of legendary magic items.

While a classic, we've put Quest campaigns last because they work well with other campaign frameworks. A wasteland warlord may be such a great threat that the party needs to find a long-lost magic item to defeat her. A pirate crew may be tasked with finding a sunken treasure needed to buy an ally's loyalty. A powerful vampire might be defeated only by a relic hidden away in the ruins of a monastery that happens to be within the borders of an enemy realm.

The characters may come from all walks of life for a quest; what's important is not who or what they are but the talents and abilities that they bring to the table. A noble may not be able to trust her soldiers or have any to spare; in a low-magic world, the heroes may be the only ones with the magical power needed to complete the quest. Given the long nature of quests, those with few ties to land or obligation are perfect candidates. Players may wish to incorporate the mindset for questing in their characters' motivations. They may be criminals looking for pardons, failed soldiers looking for redemption, or scholarly mages who were never taken seriously within their order.

All Quests have a basic model. First, the characters are tasked with accomplishing something, whether attacking a larger threat's minions or helping to fell a superior foe. They then go out and actually accomplish the task, after which they confront the real threat—presuming that wasn't the original task!—with their accomplishment in hand. Finally, the heroes must deal with any fallout from the quest, whether it be rewards for their efforts or some unexpected complication.

Not all Quests need start that way. The characters may have to prove their worth first, so the early levels of the campaign may involve a different goal, giving the heroes a chance to prove their worth to the benefactor who wants to task them with the quest. It's also possible that the Quest campaign is made up of many quests. These could be unrelated—perhaps the patron tasks the protagonists with finding a minor magic item to prove their worth—or they could be multiple parts of a single quest. They may need to find separate pieces of a broken magic item, or a collection of different items may be needed before challenging a superior foe.

In all cases, Quests are world-changers, and the heroes should feel a real sense of accomplishment when the campaign ends, as a good Quest should see them rise in power from the lowest to the highest levels. No one walks away from a Quest unchanged!

## CHANGING FRAMEWORKS

Just as you're never quite sure which directions your players are going to take the story, you're also never quite certain that a particular campaign framework is going to hold together over the course of the entire campaign. While campaigns and characters usually start hand-in-hand, there's no need to start over just because your framework has run its course. If your players want to keep playing the same characters, you might only need to change your framework to accommodate them.

## REASONS FOR CHANGE

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One of the most common reasons to change a framework is because you've run out of material. Sometimes you started your framework with only a general outline and you've run out of ideas for—or interest in—pushing back that climactic encounter between the heroes and the major adversary. Sometimes you recognize that the players' interest in the campaign is waning; something else has piqued their interest, or you've heard, "Geez, when are we going to get to the end?" a few too many times. And sometimes you just recognize that the opportunity has come and you don't want to artificially hold the characters off just because they're level 6 and you weren't planning on the final encounter until they were at least level 10.

Another common reason to change a framework is because the original doesn't fit the group. Just as a good gaming group needs chemistry amongst all the players—including the GM—a good campaign framework needs chemistry with the group. If your players have little interest in playing rakish but merciful seafaring freebooters and start murdering everyone aboard rival ships, you're going to have a hard time justifying why a queen might select them for a delicate mission. If your *Blades against the Horrors* framework requires a horrific and nihilistic atmosphere to really pop but your players keep playing it like a comedy sketch, you aren't likely to get the experience that you want.

A third common reason to change your framework is that the characters have outgrown it. You may have designed your framework to convey a pseudo-historical feel with most of the challenges involving mundane threats, only to find that such threats no longer challenge the characters as they gain levels. Your players may have acquired too much treasure over the course of their piratical adventures and have decided to retire and settle down. Your campaign may involve the heroes solving mysteries, but you've found that you aren't savvy enough to keep the players from figuring out your mysteries too quickly.

These reasons usually have one aspect in common: the campaign framework is collapsing before the players have lost interest in their characters. In some cases, it may be because the campaign has barely gotten off the ground at the point you've decided to change the framework, while in other cases it's simply because the players have been enjoying their characters and aren't ready to give them up yet. Whatever the case, the players expect to keep playing their characters through the change.

It's also possible that changing the framework is something only you see as a necessity. If you've planned a campaign framework of magical crime investigations and your PCs punch their way through all the encounters, they might not see a problem with the existing framework, especially if you've been letting them solve the mysteries without too many consequences for their brute-force approach. In cases like these, any message from you that the campaign needs to change may be met with confusion.

## QUESTIONS TO ASK

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If you've decided that a change in a campaign framework is necessary, here are a few questions to ask yourself to ease the transition.



## CHANGING FRAMEWORKS AS PART OF A CAMPAIGN ARC

While changing frameworks is often seen as a reaction to player dissonance with the campaign, you may build a change of framework into a campaign arc in advance. For example, you may decide that your campaign arc involves the characters being part of a pirate band, only to have them integrate themselves into a border barony and become its leaders, shifting the framework from High-Seas Adventure to a Game of Fiefs as the adversary, a local warlord steeped in necromancy, tries to take over the land. If you plan the change to take place just before the players pick new specializations, then they can easily reshape their characters for the change in framework.

A word of caution: even if you build a change of framework into your campaign arc, you still run the usual risks with changing frameworks. If your players are enjoying being high-seas pirates, then they may not want to shift gears and effectively become dungeon delvers for four levels. Make sure that your transition is smooth, and if there's too much resistance, you may want to change the framework again to put the group back in the water as quickly as possible!

### IS A CHANGE IN FRAMEWORK TRULY NECESSARY?

Just because things aren't working like you'd planned doesn't necessarily mean there's a mortal flaw in your framework. It's possible that all you need is a tweak here and there to get things back on track. If the characters are slugging their way through investigations, maybe all you need to do is provide consequences for doing so. A night in city jail or an adversary making her escape because the characters tipped their hand too early may be all you need to get them to think differently. Maybe the players aren't really immersing themselves in the time period because you hadn't stressed enough that they were supposed to be doing so rather than laser-focusing on the adversary of the session. Sometimes a quick discussion with your players can work wonders!

### DO YOU NEED TO PIERCE THE CURTAIN?

Sometimes when you see where the wind is blowing, you can just go with it. If, for example, your players seem far more interested in helping a local outpost thrive in the harsh wasteland than helping caravans cross it, then it's easy enough for you to focus future sessions on the community's defense and its various intrigues without making an announcement to your players.

### ARE THE CHARACTERS PREPARED FOR THE CHANGE?

Note that this says "characters," not "players." Players generally design and advance their characters according to the tone and anticipated needs of your campaign framework. Regardless of whether your players have been enjoying the combat

encounters in your campaign, if you switch the framework from "courtly intrigue" to "defenders of the duchy against fearsome creatures", then much of what's on the character sheets may no longer be applicable, and they may even be a level or three lower than what they'd normally be combat-wise. One way to rectify this is to allow the characters a one-time allowance to swap out focuses, talents, and even specializations to make them a better fit for the new campaign framework.

### DO THE PLAYERS WANT TO CHANGE FRAMEWORK?

Finally, but perhaps most importantly, you'll need to make sure that all your players agree with the change. After all, they signed on to play the previous campaign framework, not the current one. Some players may accept the change if they are allowed new characters; others may not wish to change at all. How you handle this will depend on the personalities and dynamics of your group, but it's rarely a good idea to switch frameworks if you don't have everyone on board, even if the alternative is ending the campaign.

## CAMPAIGN ARCS

A campaign framework sets a tone for the players. It tells them what the setting looks and feels like, what types of characters would work best, and what types of challenges—combat, exploration, and roleplaying—they can expect to encounter. What it is *not* is the actual series of adventures the heroes are expected to complete in progressing toward the goal of the final challenge. This progression is known as a campaign arc.

When designing a framework, we suggest working backwards: define your final adversary and understand how they operate—and through whom—until you've come to a reasonable spot for the characters to begin play. What a campaign arc does is flip that around and move the characters forward: how do you get them to the ending scene?

From a player's perspective, *Fantasy AGE* already has a campaign arc built into character advancement. Characters take specializations at levels 4 and 12 and acquire talent degrees at every even-numbered level after the specialization is chosen, gaining Master degrees at levels 8 and 16. At level 20, the characters are considered epic. This roughly means that the characters fundamentally change every four levels, which is to say there are five parts of a campaign arc that takes the characters from 1st to 20th level.

You'll want to use this model when designing the adventures for your arc. Divide your adventures into discrete segments building toward that final scene, and map character advancement to those segments. This will enable you to adjust your adventures or even the entire arc if your players move in directions that you didn't anticipate—and, trust us, they will!

Given that your players think in terms of their characters, it's a good idea to telegraph how long you expect your campaign to run in terms of levels. If one of your players really wants to become a knight, she's not going to want to save that specialization for level 12 if you're planning on ending the campaign when they reach level 10!



## FRAMEWORK EXAMPLE

# THE MEAN STREETS OF KAVSAK

Now that we've outlined how a campaign framework is developed, it's time to showcase an example in practice. We're going to follow Grace the GM as she comes up with a campaign framework for her group, which consists of Darcie, Matt, and Steve. Steve has just finished GMing a high-fantasy campaign that involved a quest with a "save the world" ending. Grace wants to do something a little different.

Being a big fan of film noir and investigative stories in general, Grace considers doing the exact opposite of Steve's continent-spanning campaign, instead focusing on a single city. She wants it to have a low-fantasy feel, with the characters playing members of the lowest rung of society forced to take any jobs they can just to scrape by. She immediately starts thinking of darkened tavern meetings, shadowed alleys, dangerous secret cults, and corrupt merchants and nobles.

When she shares her idea with the players, they are generally positive. Darcie questions the "low fantasy" aspect, noting that it sounds like Grace is really pitching "dark fantasy." Grace clarifies that she's worried that too much magic may trump much of the mystery, but Matt, a player who loves playing mages, points out none of the spells in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* are particularly troublesome, and in any event, most of the power players in the city are going to have wards and other types of magical protection anyway.

One area where Grace does get some resistance is in the "low-rung mercenary" part. Matt reminds her that the group started out as mercenaries in the last campaign, and it would be nice to have the characters belong somewhere. Steve is also resistant to the idea of just taking jobs for the highest bidder; he wants to do good, even when the cards are stacked against him. Darcie just wants lots of opportunities to hit things.

## CITY AT THE CROSSROADS

After the conversation, Grace decides to refine her setting. She decides that it takes place in a large city-state at the crossroads of many different civilizations. As an independent city, it becomes a hub of trade and mingles many different cultures, which not only grants the players free rein to mold their characters but also opens the world to Grace for inspiration. Grace noodles with Google Translate for "crossroads" and settles on the Turkish translation, Kavsak, as the city's name.

Grace then reads through the campaign styles in her *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and discovers that Darcie's suggestion of "dark fantasy" really is a better fit than "low fantasy" and is distinct from "horror," which Grace has no interest in running. Dark fantasy shares a lot of similarities with noir, and Grace decides that all the supporting characters that the protagonists meet will be shades of gray with agendas of their own.

With her world and campaign style in place, Grace decides on a theme. Since the players want to be "white hats," or at least as good as the setting will allow, Grace likes the idea of them being private investigators. The closest medieval equivalent that springs to mind is the Inquisition, but Grace doesn't like



the idea of the characters being religious fanatics. She also knows that Matt isn't a big fan of religious themes.

She settles on the idea that magic is heavily regulated by the Kavsak government, and therefore there's a market for magical detectives who can ferret out and protect against unlicensed magic use. This has evolved into a full-blown industry of "Advocates" who not only investigate and solve crimes, but who can also represent their clients in court armed with the information they've gathered. Advocates often encounter violent opposition, which should make Darcie happy.

## THREATS TO THE CITY

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With her theme in place and taking steps to ensure her players would enjoy working with it, Grace now turns to the end scene. What final adversary or scene would be worthy of such a group? Grace doesn't want to have a world-shattering ending, as Steve had already done that in the last campaign. She also knows that dark fantasy doesn't lend itself to over-the-top villainy. She needs something more personal, yet still satisfying as the culmination of a campaign.

Grace thinks about her party being white hats in a morally gray city that doesn't much care for them. She can think of no better ending than something that involves the characters forcing the various factions of the city to pull together and unite against an outside threat. She sees the end scene being an invading navy blockading the port while landing an army and expecting minimal resistance, only to have the city rise up against them and hold the invaders off long enough for other navies to arrive. All the support in the city comes from the connections that the heroes have made.

Grace likes this idea and starts thinking about how that leads back to the characters. She tries to envision the different factions that the protagonists need to gather, and create plot threads that would enable the heroes to call in favors later. Just off the cuff, she thinks about a pirate queen, a merchant prince, an archbishop, a magical guildmaster, the head of the thieves' guild, and a mercenary band as possible factions to bring to bear. She also considers the possibility of magical cults. Given the nature of dark fantasy and the fact the heroes are magical investigators, it makes sense that many of their investigations would involve unlicensed mages. As cults often grant power and influence in return for sacrifice, Grace decides that a lot of potentially "good" people in the city can be seduced into taking an easy way to the top.

## TRIALS AND TRIBULATIONS

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With various factions in mind, Grace sets about thinking of the kinds of challenges that the characters might face. Sticking with the Advocate theme, she notes that investigative abilities are going to dominate, and that given the urban environment, roleplaying encounters are likely to be at the fore. Combat and exploration both vie for second place, as the Advocates often must make their way into places where they are not welcome, and they always risk upsetting the people they interrogate.

This leads Grace into thinking about law in the city. Given the diverse interests and the city's desire to maintain independence, Grace decides that the leader or leaders of the city

would be more interested in keeping the peace than writing draconian codes. Thus, courtroom scenes are less about legal maneuvering and more about making one's client likeable and sympathetic in the eyes of a jury. Considering Darcie's input, Grace decides that the loser in court could always challenge the decision, leading to a duel of champions. If the losing party wins the duel, she still has to pay money to the winner, but she suffers no punishments other than a stain on her reputation in a city where everyone has a stain on their reputation.

The last challenge that Grace thinks about is a challenge for herself. To pull this campaign off, she decides she needs a sympathetic supporting character whom the characters can trust, only to have this ally turn out to be the enemy. This supporting character, a minor noble and middling merchant, needs the heroes' help in the beginning while working behind the scenes to undermine their rivals enough to let the invaders in. They are likely involved with one or more of the secret cults, giving the characters a red herring or two as to the true danger to the city.

Grace decides that this minor noble is being naïve. While they believe that the invaders will make them Lord Governor of Kavsak, in truth this noble is not likely to get the opportunity—because the cult, once it realizes how it has been manipulated, turns on the noble. Even if the noble survives this betrayal, the invaders aren't likely to keep them around once they've secured the city.

## CASTING CHARACTERS

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Finally, Grace thinks about the roles her players would play. Normally, an investigative campaign would call for the rogue to take center stage given that class' focuses and talents. But Grace decides instead that the main Advocate would more naturally be the mage, given that the characters will likely be investigating magical machinations most of the time. The rogue would be an expert that the mage Advocate uses to break into places and gather information and evidence, while the warrior would be employed as a bodyguard to protect the Advocate and his or her rogue expert from harm.

Grace is now ready to have the players create characters, but she already sees a problem. While she expects Darcie, Matt, and Steve to pick the warrior, mage, and rogue classes respectively, Grace really thinks that Steve would be a better fit for the mage detective. Unfortunately, when she gently tries to persuade Matt and Steve to switch their roles, Matt is very resistant; he loves playing mages.

Fortunately, Steve comes up with a solution by asking Grace if a rogue is needed at all. This question strikes Grace as extremely odd, given that she'd assumed an urban investigative campaign would need a rogue. She asks Steve to elaborate, and he notes that he could easily make a mage with a background and choices conducive to an investigator; he'd leave the potent magical stuff to his "guild colleague and good friend" Matt. Matt further riffs that his character could be more of a chirogeon, a skilled healer who could offer expert advice as well as patch up Darcie and Steve whenever they get injured.

Grace decides that she can work with that and takes note of the focuses of all three characters to ensure that her challenges match. She's excited, as this looks like it will be a very interesting campaign!



## BUILDING THE ADVENTURE

**F**antasy AGE provides limitless opportunities for storytelling and adventure. While the rules present both players and Game Masters with flexible guidelines for telling these tales, they are merely one tool in a GM's repertoire. Many experienced Game Masters enjoy running play sessions by the seat of their pants, dynamically reacting to the PCs' actions and making up the story as they go. That said, this approach can be intimidating for less experienced GMs who might not be as familiar with the art of creating a narrative from thin air.

### THESE ARE YOUR STORIES

One of the most popular methods of telling stories in roleplaying games is the use of adventures, also known as modules or scenarios. Adventures organize relevant information in order to inform a game's plot, theme, goals, and setting. The majority of an adventure's details are for the Game Master's eyes only. After all, players who read the details of an adventure can spoil the fun of experiencing the narrative their GM hopes to tell.

This chapter provides you with guidelines for creating adventures of your own. In addition to exploring different adventure formats, it discusses a variety of other topics that allow you to further tailor your adventures to your group and your own inimitable style. Though the information presented is written with the neophyte Game Master in mind, even experienced GMs will likely find some value in this chapter.

### USING ADVENTURES

In a roleplaying game, an adventure is a series of connected encounters that combine to define a coherent story. As such, an adventure provides a solid framework, story, and theme for the tales you choose to tell.

If you think of an adventure as a film, each encounter within the adventure is akin to a scene. By stringing multiple scenes together, you create a complete narrative from beginning to end. Each encounter should move the story forward, adding detail, suspense, drama, and action to the overall storyline. Unlike a movie director, you don't have a cast of actors who follow your orders to the letter. Your players are both your co-stars and your contributors, and their characters' actions have an immediate effect on the adventure's outcome.

Whether you plan your adventure well in advance or navigate through the story session by session depends largely on your preferences as a Game Master. In the end, there is no "wrong" way to design an adventure. What it really comes down to is what works for you and your players.

### CAMPAIGNS

Much as an adventure is a series of connected encounters, a campaign is created by connecting several adventures together. While an encounter might take a session (or less) to finish and an adventure can take three or four sessions

## WINGING IT AND ADVENTURES

As always, there is no “right” or “wrong” way to run *Fantasy AGE*. As long as you and your players have fun and enjoy yourselves, you’re doing it correctly. Over time, many GMs become adept at “winging it,” internalizing or bypassing many of the steps detailed here while still providing their group with plenty of opportunity for fun and engaging adventures. This process still uses much of the advice and guidance detailed here, simply in an informal or internalized manner, with much of the process taking place quickly inside the GM’s head.

(or more) to complete, a campaign can take years to reach its ultimate conclusion. In learning to design adventures, a GM is also creating the building blocks of a campaign. While the tools and processes for creating a campaign as a whole are detailed in **CHAPTER 1: BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK**, the lessons you learn here can easily be adapted to expanding your adventures into a long-term narrative.

## ONE-SHOT ADVENTURES

Unlike a standard adventure, which might encompass as few as two play sessions, a one-shot adventure is designed to last only a single session of gameplay. You might create a one-shot adventure in order to test a new rules system or explore a new game supplement. A one-shot adventure is an ideal choice for introducing new players to tabletop roleplaying games in general. One-shot games are also useful for convention play, which is often restricted to a certain time slot or session length.

One-shots tend to be fairly self-contained and linear in their design. Providing players with too many options can draw out the action. Unlike a long-term game, it’s more convenient to skip character creation at the table for one-shots. Instead, generate a robust selection of characters ahead of time and allow your players to choose the one they want to play when they arrive at the game. Not only does this save time, but it also allows you to tailor the background, composition, and abilities of the party to conform more closely to the adventure’s content.

## USING PUBLISHED ADVENTURES

Published (or prewritten) adventures are common accessories available for many different game lines. The greatest benefit of such adventures is that they come completely detailed and ready to play. Nearly any GM can be ready to run a published adventure after spending only a short amount of time to become familiar with it. They can also be mined for detailed locations, encounter ideas, new takes on monsters and non-player characters, and story seeds.

Published adventures are excellent tools for GMs who are interested in learning how adventures are created and organized. The majority of published adventures include a wealth of information, such as the scenario’s backstory, creature and character profiles, illustrations, maps, and detailed descrip-

tions of locations where encounters are liable to take place. By reading an adventure, Game Masters can find inspiration to fuel their own adventures and campaigns.

While published adventures are incredibly convenient, they rarely align perfectly with a Game Master’s existing campaign. As a result, it is often a good idea to tailor prewritten adventures to your own game with your player characters in mind. Without such tweaks, dropping your players into the adventure can be jarring and impersonal. By linking the adventure to the characters, their backstories, and the events they’ve already experienced, however, you provide ways for your players to become invested in the adventure. Most adventures include guidelines for adapting them to lower- or higher-level campaigns.

Another thing to be aware of is that you won’t be the only Game Master running a published adventure. It’s possible that one or more of your players have played through (or even Game Mastered) the adventure you’d like to run. This can be a sticky issue, as it has the potential to limit which elements of the adventure – if any – you decide to use. That said, some players don’t mind going through the same content more than once. If they are good at separating their own knowledge from that of their character, so much the better.

## GOING OFF THE RAILS

An adventure can provide a Game Master with a valuable roadmap for their game and the stories they want to create with their players. But regardless of an adventure’s format – be it a single story path or an open sandbox – there is always the potential for characters to bypass your carefully crafted encounters and wander into unknown territory. Such things are bound to happen eventually, and it always pays to be prepared for such an eventuality. After all, creating an adventure is a time-consuming process. The last thing any GM wants is to throw away their hard work due to an unexpected player detour.

Should you find yourself in a situation where one or more players insist on going their own way, you do have some options.

## ROLL WITH IT

If you consider yourself a flexible GM with a gift for improvisation, and you don’t mind spending a session or three exploring the unforeseen path your players have taken, you can always take their detour in stride. In addition to giving your players more ownership of the story, such tangents can provide opportunities for the players to explore their characters in great detail. Their actions also serve to shore up the story and may even provide you with additional material for the planned portions of your adventure.

## BE HONEST

A roleplaying game is supposed to be fun for everyone involved, and that includes the Game Master. If the idea of putting your adventure on hold in order to pursue player tangents doesn’t appeal to you, let them know that. Call a timeout and explain that you aren’t prepared for such a detour. Tell them that their current actions don’t further the story you’ve laid the ground-

work for. The majority of players are going to understand your concerns and allow you to bring things back on track. If you don't mind exploring the players' direction once the adventure concludes, you can always come back to it.

## ADJUST AND ADAPT

When the player characters stray from the story, look for opportunities to change their direction and guide them back on track. For example, say your adventure requires the heroes to go to a seedy bar, but they decide to instead visit an NPC who is entirely unrelated to the current plot. When they arrive at his home, let them discover that he was going to meet someone at the same seedy bar you had intended the party to visit. You can even create a reason to involve the NPC in the story. Being flexible in the adventure's minor details gives you the agility to adjust plot points on the fly.

Care should be taken when attempting to put the players on the proper path. Many players resent "railroading" and what they perceive as the subversion of their characters' free will. Feelings like these can lessen their enjoyment of the game, something you should always strive to avoid.

## ADVENTURE FORMAT

Adventures can be designed using a number of formats and design philosophies. Many of these formats are related to traditional methods used by authors, playwrights, and screenwriters, and for good reason. After all, a roleplaying game is very similar to a book, play, or movie, albeit one where the protagonists—the player characters—play a significant role in deciding the story's ultimate outcome. While the Game Master may be considered the director of such a production, their executive power is mitigated somewhat by the amount of control the players have over the story itself.

The format you choose for your adventure should make it easier for you to parse your story. In effect, an adventure format provides an outline for the adventure's events—a sequence of events. You can adhere closely to the format's dictates, or you can use it only as a general guideline as to how and when things take place during play. If you've never designed an adventure before, your best bet is to choose a format that feels comfortable for you. If the format you choose turns out to be more of a hindrance than a help, you can always change your mind later on.

## THREE-ACT ADVENTURES

Three-act adventures take their name and inspiration from three-act plays. Properly used, a three-act adventure format can provide balanced pacing and a somewhat predictable sequence of events leading up to the final climactic encounter. Each act within the structure establishes and resolves any number of plot points and details. This is a valuable process, especially for inexperienced GMs who are interested in a useful but simple template for creating their first adventure.

To properly use the three-act format, you need to organize the events of your adventure chronologically and then determine which act each event takes place in based on the format. As you piece your adventure together, think of each encounter

as a scene in a movie or play. A single act within this format can include as many or as few encounters as you wish. Even though the three-act format assumes a specific sequence of events, you need not be bound to follow it implicitly. In the end, the choice of how your story is told is entirely up to you.

## ACT ONE: EXPOSITION

During your adventure's first act, all the pieces are placed on the proverbial game board. The first act begins with exposition and defines any history, background, or setting details you feel the characters should be aware of. It also establishes the adventure's main characters, including your player characters (otherwise known as the protagonists), as well as important NPCs. These characters, their relationships with one another, and their place in the world as a whole are defined.

Once these details are established, often while the player characters are being created, you must finalize the adventure's conflict. This conflict can be anything you like, but it should be something with enough "legs" to last until the adventure's climax in Act Three. For example, a virulent plague that threatens the city the heroes live in can provide them with incentive to find a cure. This is especially true if their friends and loved ones are adversely affected.

Having chosen your adventure's conflict, all that remains is to provide a catalyst in order to kick-start the action. The catalyst that gets things rolling, usually called a plot hook, should involve all the players, and it can consist of nearly any event or action. For instance, your players might decide of their own accord to investigate the source of the plague. They might be approached by the authorities and asked to investigate on behalf of the city's magistrate—or, worse, perhaps some evidence points to the characters as the cause of the plague, forcing them to clear their names as a result.

### BACKGROUND HOOKS

Background hooks relate to the history of one or more player characters. Since they pertain directly to the adventurers, these hooks offer a compelling way for the heroes to get involved in the action. Players often enjoy it when their characters' backstories are reflected in adventures, especially if they've taken the time to gift their characters with unique histories.

That said, it's always a good idea to consult with your players to see if they're comfortable with your interpretation of their carefully laid storylines. The strongest background hooks are rooted in a healthy collaboration between a Game Master and their players, and failing to do so has the potential to derail an adventure when a player's opinions on a character's past don't align with what you present them with.

One potential roadblock for using background hooks is that other players may feel left out or marginalized if your story focuses on a single character. Finding a way to weave everyone's background hooks into a cohesive narrative can be challenging, but when done correctly, it gives everyone at the table a reason to be invested in the storyline.

If you prefer to run your roleplaying games by the seat of your pants, then you may find freeform adventures to be right up your alley. Freeform games offer players a large degree of freedom given that very little is planned out ahead of time. Once their characters are created, they are dropped into the world and expected to find their own paths to peril or profit. While you, as a GM, may have one or two ideas about the adventure's central storyline, you are better served by listening to your players' cues and desires in regard to the sorts of encounters they want to experience.

In general, freeform adventures provide your players with more contributive power than you might be used to. Rules are often secondary to the story, and the characters' backstories are rife with clues concerning the sorts of things your players are interested in doing. Players are encouraged to add to the narrative of the story, though the Game Master is the final arbiter of what they can and can't influence.

## ACT TWO: RISING ACTION

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Once the basis of the adventure has been established, it's time to dive into the action. Act Two should start with an encounter between the player characters and their antagonist or their minions. In the above example, wherein the characters are accused of causing the plague, a group of city guards under orders from the magistrate attempts to arrest the party for their rumored complicity in spreading the plague. The city guard may even be under orders to kill the player characters in order to avoid risking contagion!

How the characters react to this confrontation should obviously set the tone for the rest of the adventure. As the story evolves, the threat posed by the story's antagonist grows progressively worse. It's usually all the heroes can do to stay one step ahead of their enemies. In our example, perhaps the plague continues to spread, several nobles and guildsmen fall victim to the disease, and the authorities continue to hound the characters. The antagonist generally grows more and more powerful over the course of the second act, while the heroes appear to be a razor's edge from failure.

Despite the dangers and obstacles that face the characters, this is also the time for them to increase their odds of victory. The protagonists should be allowed to claim minor victories during the second act. They may uncover new information about their enemy, especially clues or hidden weaknesses that can give them a leg up during the story's climax. They should also be given opportunities to strengthen their position through finding new equipment (such as magic items) and enlisting allies to help them.

## ACT THREE: RESOLUTION

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The conflict is finally resolved in Act Three. This is known as the story's climax. The player characters somehow manage to defeat the enemy, often using allies, equipment, or knowledge discovered in Act Two in order to do so. In addition to the resolution of the central conflict, any side stories can also be resolved. With the villain exposed and defeated, the heroes can reap the rewards of their struggle—riches, fame, and experience points are some of the most common dividends to be reaped. Look to the **Player Rewards** section later in this chapter for a general discussion of rewards in adventures, and see the **Building Rewards** chapter of this book for an in-depth look at different types of rewards.

In our example, the heroes finally confront and overcome their enemy, exposing their involvement in spreading the

plague. Their names are cleared, the plague is cured, and they are honored within the city. Soon their names become household terms of endearment, and future opportunities for fame, fortune, and adventure are certain to present themselves.

## FIVE-ACT ADVENTURES

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The five-act format is also based on a method commonly used to create plays. William Shakespeare generally adhered to the five-act structure in his own creations. Though similar in many ways to a three-act composition, the five-act format further breaks down when specific elements and events take place. While each of the five acts has a specific function, there is rarely a clear distinction between them onstage.

The first two acts of the five-act format tend to adhere rather closely to their siblings in the three-act format. The first act focuses on exposition, while the second addresses the catalyst which leads to the story's rising action. The differences inherent to the five-act format are made clear in the final three acts. The third act focuses on the story's climax, where the heroes' anticipation is finally realized during the final showdown.

The fourth act concerns the story's falling action, which is in contrast to the rising action of the second act. During the falling action, the main conflict is resolved and the characters achieve either victory or defeat (the latter being a common occurrence in tragedies). There may be some shred of doubt as to the adventure's final outcome during the fourth act, but the presence of such isn't a hard rule.

The fifth and final act focuses on denouement and concludes with the final scenes of the overall narrative. The primary purpose of this act is to resolve other conflicts and establish a level playing field for the protagonists. The tension generated by the story's events dissipates, and the player characters are returned to their normal lives. Given this is a roleplaying game, however, the definition of the word "normal" is up for debate.

## PLOT-POINT ADVENTURES

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In the plot-point adventure model, the player characters are provided with a sandbox of sorts to explore. As they do so, they discover opportunities for adventure in specific locations or when certain conditions (established by the GM) are met. This provides the characters with an impetus to explore the world around them, whether they are confined to a single city or turned loose upon an entire continent. It also provides



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a lot of variety, since the adventures are episodic and relatively self-contained.

As a Game Master, running a plot-point adventure requires you to create a list of important locations in your game world. Each of these locations should feature one or more plot hooks for short adventures in that specific place. How short should these adventures be? In general, your player characters should be able to complete one over the course of one or two game sessions.

## OVERARCHING PLOTS

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Ideally, the mini-adventures you design for your characters also relate to an overarching, worldwide plot or conflict. This allows you to connect all these small, seemingly disparate stories to a larger narrative with much higher stakes. Once they have completed a short adventure, the characters should reap whatever rewards are coming to them, but they may also learn something new about the overarching world plot or gain an item or ally that brings them closer to resolving it.

## THE WORLD GAZETTEER

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When creating your adventure's gazetteer, focus on interesting locations that are (ideally) tied to one or more of the heroes' backgrounds. This ensures that your players have a reason to pay them a visit. Create short descriptions for each location, especially the portions of them that you expect the characters to visit. Think about what makes these places unique, craft a unique plot hook for each of them, and then determine how the mini-plot relates to the overarching world plot. You must also consider the sorts of NPCs and creatures that inhabit the locale and define them.

See **CHAPTER 4: BUILDING LOCATIONS** for details on building engaging locations in your campaign.

## THE MINI-ADVENTURES

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The mini-adventures you create can adhere to any format you like. For example, you can apply either the three- or five-act format to these smaller stories in order to organize the sequence of events you envision. You aren't obligated to design an entire adventure for every location, either. It's perfectly fine to use one or two encounters, rather than a whole adventure, to define the action the heroes are going to find themselves involved in. Though the mini-adventure should be generic enough to involve any of your player characters, it never hurts to tailor it to one or more of your characters' backgrounds.

Adventures and encounters don't need to be tied to specific locations. Tying them to situations or other criteria is also acceptable, and this can have the benefit of ensuring that some events don't take place prematurely. You might trigger an encounter based on a character's level or their acquisition of a certain skill, ability, or perk. For example, when one of your player characters reaches level 4 and takes the duelist specialization, they might be challenged to a duel by a well-known mercenary or assassin.

Once the adventurers have completed a mini-adventure, make sure they know where to go next. You needn't restrict them to a single destination, either. It's often best to give them two or three choices and allow them to choose their course of action.

## WRAPPING IT ALL UP

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Once the party has completed all the mini-adventures and encounters you've designed, it's time to resolve the over-

You might have noticed how many variables and how much work go into creating an adventure. It can be incredibly intimidating to newer GMs. Even experienced GMs (and professional game designers!) are sometimes daunted by the amount of labor involved. This is especially true when you sit down for the first time to brainstorm and you realize you aren't in complete possession of all the facts.

Relax! You don't need to know everything from the start. As long as you have a general outline showing how the characters get from the start of Act One to the end of Act Three, you should be fine. This chapter lays out every aspect you could possibly want, but the truth is you usually just need enough to keep players invested and having fun. The key is to continue working on your adventure between sessions, fleshing out the details and adjusting them as necessary given the events that take place during play. This process allows your adventure to evolve over time in an organic fashion. Depending on the group and GM, this process may be precise and work-intensive, or it might be freeform and casual.

A good rule of thumb is to develop your adventure at least two sessions ahead. That way, you're not working so far ahead that you risk nullifying any work you've done due to events that take place during play. It also gives you a buffer on the off chance you don't have time to expand on your adventure design during your normal downtime.

As play progresses and the adventure continues to come together, opportunities for new stories are going to present themselves. Some of these opportunities are going to be more appealing than the ideas you originally had, and that's perfectly fine. As long as you remain flexible and can adapt to the changing landscape of your game, your players aren't likely to notice or care.

arching plot. This should be reflected in a new series of encounters (or another adventure) where the characters can use all they've learned or gained to confront and defeat the main antagonist and their minions. Unlike the other conflicts and obstacles the characters have overcome, this final confrontation should be as epic and memorable as you can make it.

## DESIGNING ADVENTURES

While it's a simple matter to purchase a published adventure and run it right out of the proverbial box, creating your own isn't difficult to do. It's definitely more rewarding and allows you to easily tailor the adventure to your own style as a Game Master, as well as to your players' preferences. When you run your friends through a narrative of your own creation, you're providing them with a unique experience they won't find anywhere else. The value of this novelty can't be overstated, and it often results in increased player investment in both your game and their characters.

When creating an adventure from scratch, there are many things to consider. Not all of these aspects are crucial, but each one can add depth to your final product. The process can be somewhat intimidating, especially when you consider all the different possibilities and unknowns at once. Relax! Creating adventures is a fun, creative exercise that is incredibly rewarding, both for you as a GM and for your friends as players.

### STEP 1

## BRAINSTORM

Getting started on an adventure design can be the hardest part of the process, often for one of two reasons. Either you have too many good ideas, or you don't have enough. In the first case, choosing only one idea you want to pursue is the

challenge. In the latter, coming up with something that feels unique and engaging is the hard part. In either case, understand that your ideas—as boring as they might seem to you—are going to evolve and grow as time goes on. Try not to be so hard on yourself that you throw in the towel before you've even begun.

As with any creative endeavor, it never hurts to brainstorm the sort of adventure you want to write. It's possible you already have one or two ideas, either based on your own musings or inspired by other source material. If you've chosen a published campaign setting or game world, you can always mine it for adventure seeds and plot hooks. You can also use your own setting for the adventure, if you have one, and if you don't, your adventure could serve as a springboard for a world of your creation.

Start by simply jotting down words related to the sort of adventure you want to make. The words you write down might have to do with the plot itself, the central conflict, the villain, an ancient treasure, or a nefarious curse. As you write down more words and phrases, try to connect them or look at them from different perspectives. Are you drawn to or excited by a particular idea more than the others?

In this process, it's also a good idea to consider your favorite aspects of being a Game Master. Do you enjoy telling stories? Play-acting NPCs? Confounding your players with riddles or traps? You should definitely look to capitalize on your own strengths during the process. On the other hand, it doesn't hurt to stretch yourself a bit and focus on elements you might normally steer clear of. After all, it never hurts to be a well-rounded Game Master.

Once you feel like you've got enough to go on, narrow your list down and flesh out your ideas in more detail. You don't need to be incredibly detailed at this point. Generalizations and concepts are more than enough to go on right now. The important part of brainstorming is to plumb your creative depths and discover what kinds of stories you find most compelling. In the end, an adventure's outcome hinges on how interested and invested you are in the game you run.

## SPEAK TO YOUR PLAYERS

Although you may be the Game Master, you aren't the only storyteller in your gaming group. Though some GMs consider their players to be passive participants in the stories they tell, nothing could be further from the truth. Your players are some of the best assets you have at your disposal when it comes to defining an adventure's specifics. Whether you broach the topic in casual conversation or pick a time to actively discuss your ideas with them, their input can be invaluable. Not only can you determine what they enjoy most about roleplaying games, but you can also mine them for both encounter and adventure ideas while you're at it.

You needn't give any secrets away during these preliminary conversations. Speak in general terms, though you should always be specific when it comes to which game system and setting you want to use. Find out what intrigues your players about the game setting you've chosen and what kinds of characters they might want to play. This is also your chance to make your own suggestions. For example, if you plan to employ a lot of traps and locks in your encounters, make sure your players know they'll need those Dexterity focuses (though you don't have to tell them why, exactly).

If you already have an established game or campaign but are looking for a new direction to take it in, you can probably guess where your players want to go next. By looking at their experiences in previous encounters and adventures, it's easy to see any loose ends that weren't sufficiently tied up. Your characters might even have plans of their own, such as the desire to establish a stronghold or take revenge upon an NPC who caused them harm. Entire stories can be created based on the people, places, events, and things the characters have experienced up till now.

Another reason to speak with your players is to make sure they're interested in the adventure you're planning to run for them. Nothing derails a game faster than finding out no one at your gaming table likes either the game system or setting you plan to use. You probably have a good idea of their preferences already, but it never hurts to ask, especially if you're planning to springboard a new campaign with your latest adventure idea. In the end, you want everyone to enjoy themselves. Happy players always come back for more.

For more advice about speaking with your players, see **CHAPTER 1: BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK** in this book.

### PLAYER VOLITION AND INFLUENCE

One additional consideration when involving your players is how much control you plan to give them regarding your story. This often comes down to your style as a Game Master and how comfortable you are allowing the characters' actions to affect your carefully crafted narrative. You should always expect your player characters to come to conclusions or perform actions that you never intended. It's all a normal part of being a Game Master.

While players taking your adventure off the rails—either by chasing after a tangent or by ignoring the story entirely—has been discussed previously, the influence your players have

on the adventure's outcome should be given careful consideration. For instance, what if your players kill the villain with a lucky arrow shot? Or accidentally sell the sacred relic that allows access to the Fiery Temple of Vurlak? What if they decide to travel by boat instead of via horseback as you expected them to?

When you get right down to it, being flexible is the best option for maintaining integrity in your story. If you take great pains to prevent your players from diverging from the path you've set, it's going to be obvious to them. Worse, many players find such resistance to be a distraction that limits their immersion in and, as a result, their enjoyment of the game. Being flexible, on the other hand, reinforces that the characters' actions have an effect, for better or worse, on the world around them.

Consider each situation on a case-by-case basis. Ask yourself how much the characters' actions are going to affect the story. Does it really matter if they want to travel by boat instead of by road? Will they be able to recover the sacred relic easily, or does the villain take advantage of their foolishness and take it for himself? Rather than considering such events as disruptive, see them as what they really are: opportunities for storytelling.

In our first example, the players kill the villain with a lucky shot. If your villain exists in a void, such an event is liable to derail the entire adventure. Luckily, your villain is only one of many non-player characters in the world, and that position of power can easily be assumed by someone else. Perhaps a second-in-command chooses to fill the leadership vacuum the players have created, or the villain has a vengeful sibling who now has even more reason to see the heroes killed.

### HOW MUCH PREP IS ENOUGH?

GMs who prefer to improvise most of their adventures still prepare or define their adventures and setting. They just do it in two steps. First they get the necessary ideas, themes, and concepts in their head. Then they use that internal information and prep time to answer questions the players have during play, respond to their actions, and keep things moving forward. In truth, all GMs do this to some extent; it's simply that the improv-heavy GM has far less written on the page as a guide before using this process.

So how much prep is enough? That depends greatly on the abilities and preference of the individual GM. However, a good rule of thumb is as follows: once you can answer any reasonable question about your adventure, its setting, the NPCs, and other significant parts, you're ready.

Some GMs need to write down locations, characters, and plots in detail before they reach this level of familiarity and comfort with the material. Others actually are more comfortable winging it and do better with fewer concrete elements. There is no right or wrong way to do it. The key is simply to find out what kind of GM you are and be that. The rest will come easily.



## DEFINE THE STORY

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Now that you've brainstormed your ideas and taken the measure of your players, it's time to define your story in more depth. You probably have a general concept of what you intend your adventure to be. Now take those thoughts and organize them into a coherent plan of action. This can be accomplished by creating a rough outline and sequence of events. Ask yourself what needs to happen in order for the story to progress. What must the party do in order to resolve the conflict? How do they get to that point?

### ATMOSPHERE AND THEME

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To give your adventure additional depth, you should consider its intended atmosphere and theme. Atmosphere is the feeling or mood conveyed by the narrative. Conversely, theme is the central topic of the adventure, which is often encompassed by a word or phrase. While deciding on a specific atmosphere or theme isn't strictly necessary, doing so has the potential to make your game both poignant and memorable in the minds of your players.

Establishing and maintaining a coherent atmosphere is fairly simple. Narrative details that impart atmosphere to an adventure include the setting itself as well as the historic details of the story or its characters. Atmosphere is also firmly rooted in the descriptions you provide to your players. The key is to try and elicit specific emotions in your players through the story's details, and a few choice words are all it takes to establish the desired mood. As long as you consistently reinforce your chosen atmosphere over the course of the adventure, your players are bound to be swept up by it.

For example, if you want to impart a sense of peril to your adventure, be sure to call out threatening details in the descriptions you provide. Comparing the peaks of a jagged mountain range to the teeth of a predator or calling out parallels to weapons in everyday objects or actions is a good way to start. Just a word or two every so often is enough to keep the mood consistent throughout the adventure.

Integrating a specific theme into your adventure is as simple as deciding on a topic. Common themes include betrayal, conquest, discovery, fear, greed, love, and obligation, but nearly any concept can be used to enhance your story. You can even choose multiple themes if you like, though too many can muddy the overall point you're trying to make. Much like atmosphere, themes can be used to convey mood. They can also be used to impart lessons or social commentary as long as you aren't too heavy-handed.

### CONFLICT AND HOOKS

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It's likely you have an idea of what your adventure's central conflict is. In literary terms, "conflict" is a fancy way of referring to the central challenge facing the characters. Though every encounter you devise for your adventure is going to have its own unique conflict (or conflicts), the central conflict is the one that matters the most in the long term. By resolving the central conflict, the characters can successfully complete the adventure.

Conflicts are often related to a story hook—an event or circumstance that "hooks" the characters and involves them in the primary narrative of the adventure. Deciding how best to hook your characters into confronting your adventure's central conflict is one of the most crucial decisions you'll make. The hook can be anything from a job offer in a seedy tavern to a letter from a long-forgotten relative informing one of the heroes that their family line has been cursed by a demon.

Sometimes it makes sense for each character to have their own unique hook that unites them into pursuing a common goal. This approach is attractive because it has the potential to add depth and complexity to what might otherwise be a simple conflict. It can also make each player feel special, since they have their own unique reasons for becoming involved in the story. This is especially true if you can tie the hooks to each character's backstory.

### ADVENTURE OBJECTIVES & RESOLUTION

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The central conflict of the adventure determines its long-term objective. If the players have been framed for a capital crime, then their long-term objective is probably to clear their names. Accomplishing the objective of the adventure should require a significant amount of time and effort on the characters' part. It is also possible that the adventure's central conflict can be resolved only by accomplishing multiple related objectives. In the prior example, the framed adventurers may need to bring the guilty party to justice before they can prove their innocence.

Once the action is underway, your characters should know, in no uncertain terms, what the objective of the adventure is. They should never have to stop and ask what their goals are. If the objective changes, or a new central objective is introduced along the way, it should be made obvious to them sooner or later—preferably sooner. Any ambiguity in the adventure's objective can, at best, cause confusion. At the worst, players can become frustrated when the goals they've been chasing are suddenly changed without warning.

It should be noted that occasional plot twists, if well-executed, can have a significant effect on an adventure's objectives. Care should be taken when introducing these sorts of changes, and the GM should ensure that they are supported by internal logic and consistency—even if such logic and consistency aren't immediately obvious to the players. At some point the real reasons behind the plot twist, as well as its implications, should be revealed to the adventurers.

### STORY BEATS

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When creating your outline, start by listing the important story beats. A story beat is any point of action that moves the narrative forward. Individually, story beats are like notes in a musical composition. When strung together, they create a complete narrative experience, much as musical notes create a song. For instance, assume the heroes are attacked by a group of ruffians in an alley. Afterward, a surviving ruffian reveals that the local thieves' guild has issued an open contract for the characters' lives. Now the characters must decide how best to respond to the news of having a price on their heads. The story has moved forward, introducing a conflict that the players must now attempt to resolve.

While ordering your story beats into an outline (or “beat sheet”), you can work chronologically forward, backward, or any other way that feels right to you. The important thing is that your sequence of events makes logical sense and is consistent with the story you’re planning to tell. Not every encounter you design needs to be experienced chronologically, either. You may want to create several encounters that can occur in any order, but which in aggregate have the same outcome as if they had been chronological.

For example, the characters begin their adventure in a city. In order to discover the identity of the villain, they must first uncover several clues by speaking to three NPCs who are scattered throughout the metropolis—one in a tavern, one in a manor house, and one in a temple-administered poorhouse. The order the clues are collected in doesn’t matter, only that all three combine to inform the players of the villain’s name. This allows the players the freedom of choosing where to go first, and this goes a long way toward making the world around them feel dynamic.

Three beats in succession followed by a rest or pause in the action is a solid and familiar model. Many stories follow this model, and players will often feel comfortable with this pacing. However, you can use fewer or more beats in a part of an adventure. More make an act or encounter in the adventure feel fast, frenetic, and that there’s little room for error or misstep. Fewer beats make things seem prolonged or deliberate and can raise tension and feelings of mystery and uncertainty. Usually more than five beats in succession without some sort of resolution or pause to regroup and analyze events starts to wear players down, but this is guideline, not a hard rule.

## ENCOUNTERS

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Once you know how the adventure is going to play out, define the story beats in terms of the encounters they represent. An adventure is ultimately a series of encounters that lead the characters to the story’s resolution. Make sure you include enough detail in your encounter notes so that you can successfully narrate them in terms of the game mechanics you’re using. These important details might include statistics for NPCs and creatures, notes on their personalities and motives, descriptions of locations, and (if necessary) maps.

Every Game Master is different, so the level of detail you provide is entirely up to you. Some GMs feel more comfortable planning out every minute detail of an encounter, while others are perfectly happy with a few sparse notes to guide them. Keep in mind that this is a learning experience, and it won’t be long before you determine your own preferences. If you find yourself at a loss for words when describing a location, NPC, or some other encounter detail during play, you probably need more detailed notes in the future.

For more information about creating encounters, refer to **CHAPTER 3: BUILDING ENCOUNTERS**.

## ADVENTURE LENGTH

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How long should your adventure take for the characters to complete? There isn’t a right or wrong answer to this question, but there’s nothing wrong with setting a ballpark figure. Depending on how long your typical play session lasts,



## PROACTIVE ANTAGONISTS

One method of adventure design revolves around the proactive antagonist. In this model, the GM takes time to consider the goals, personality, and plans of their antagonist. They consider what the antagonist wants, what they will do when they fail or are foiled, and how far they are willing to go to succeed in their plans.

If a GM knows their antagonist very well, having them act in response to the heroes' actions and campaign events can stand in for a lot of other preparation. Such antagonists can be memorable and formidable in ways more reactive antagonists can't. However, these are also the characters that have the highest risk of the GM adopting them as a favorite or proxy PC (sometimes called a "GMPC") and using them to frustrate the protagonists, annoy the players, and generally play against the group instead of with them.

Remember that even if you get inside the antagonist's head to better roleplay them, and even if you kind of like them or appreciate them, they still aren't the star of the game and they aren't the protagonist of the adventure. That doesn't mean they have to lose, but they shouldn't be favored to win.

you should be able to determine how many encounters (on average) your players can complete per session. Using this information, you can plan ahead. Assume that one of your combat encounters is a set piece with a powerful enemy. Given that it's liable to take some time to complete, you don't want it starting close to the end of your play session.

Beyond the considerations of real-world time, you also want to make sure your adventure doesn't wear out its welcome. A good adventure should never feel tedious, as if it's gone on for too long. To keep players engaged in the story, make sure that every encounter they experience is an important part of the adventure's storyline. While extraneous encounters and activities are inevitable, they should be kept to a minimum. Drive the action forward so that the players have a sense of accomplishment rather than stagnation.

### STEP 4

## DEFINE IMPORTANT NPCs

Every great story is shored up by a tremendous supporting cast. While you needn't concern yourself with naming and detailing every soul that exists in your game world, you should definitely focus on a handful of important non-player characters. As a Game Master, the NPCs who inhabit your world are a crucial tool for interacting with the characters and conveying the story. Not only do NPCs remind the PCs that they exist in a living, dynamic world, but they can also provide a sense of stability to their everyday lives.

Creating an important NPC requires you to consider who they are as an individual. You ultimately want them to be unique to your game world. They should possess a distinct background, personality, and physical appearance, and these should be informed by their experience, preferences, and

opinions. The more you can flesh out your NPC, the more distinctive your players are going to find them. You can even give them distinct accents and dialects, but remember to avoid offensive or stereotypical speech patterns.

Not all NPCs need to be defined mechanically. That is, you don't always need to create statistics and abilities for them. However, if the NPC in question is planning to work alongside the heroes, or if they are particularly powerful in some way or have ulterior motives (whether or not the protagonists know it), it's not a bad idea to define what they are capable of.

## QUEST GIVERS

At their simplest, quest givers are individuals willing to employ the heroes to perform high-risk activities on their behalf. While such characters aren't always a necessity, especially when your characters are driving their own progress toward an adventure's conclusion, they can provide much-needed direction during early play sessions. Once those earliest sessions have passed, familiar quest givers can continue to employ the heroes in other activities. Many adventuring groups value having a trustworthy agent who is willing to toss them the occasional (preferably lucrative) bone.

Whatever their origin, quest givers should have a consistent motivation for involving the player characters in whichever intrigues they are party to. Are they serving their own interests by employing the party, or do they answer to a higher authority? Do they view the heroes as mere tools, or do they hold them in high regard given their experience, abilities, and reputations? Are they above betraying their employees for profit, or are they bound to honor the terms of a contract no matter what?

## ADVERSARIES AND VILLAINS

One of the most important components of a satisfying adventure is the villain. Whether this is a single individual working alone or a member of a larger group of like-minded miscreants, it's always a good idea to take a little extra time to flesh them out. Be sure to give them a detailed history that informs their personality and objective. Decide what they look like, what kinds of clothes they wear, and one or two interesting quirks—minor mental or physical behaviors or habits—that set them apart from the crowd.

Not every villain needs to be evil, or even malicious. Sometimes it's merely a matter of the heroes being at odds with their nemesis because each is vying for a different outcome. While adversaries who are downright wicked have their place in roleplaying games, moral ambiguity can provide an additional level of complexity to your adversary's personality. Under different circumstances, they might even have been a friend or associate of the heroes.

As your players are liable to come into conflict with the villain, it pays to know what that foe's abilities are. It's often tempting to create villains who are powerful enough to face down an entire group of experienced adventurers all by themselves, but this need not always be the case. Well-grounded villains who rely on minions to do the majority of their dirty work are just as interesting, if not more so, than omnipotent evildoers. That said, having a completely incompetent villain can result in a final confrontation that is more anticlimactic than exciting.

## ALLIES, CONTACTS, AND PEERS

Even in the bleakest of settings, the heroes need friends. A unique way to provide each of your characters with a link to the game world is to give them a list of allies, contacts, and peers they can call upon during play. Using their backgrounds as a starting place, create short write-ups for the kinds of individuals each character would logically know. For example, a professional warrior is liable to know other professional fighters—by reputation, even if not personally. Warriors are also bound to be acquainted with armorers, weaponsmiths, and soldiers.

What are the differences between allies, contacts, and peers? It really comes down to how well the character knows the individual. Allies, for example, are friends that the characters can actually depend on when they need a hand. A staunch ally rarely hesitates to fight on a character's behalf, loan them money, or help hide a body. Contacts, on the other hand, provide adventurers only with information or gossip relevant to their area of expertise. Peers are even more peripheral to the character in question, and represent professionals in a given line of work. Peers can behave in manners similar to both allies and contacts, though they expect to be compensated for any help or information they provide.

Characters who nurture their relationships with allies, contacts, and peers should be rewarded. A respected peer might eventually become an ally, for example. Likewise, those who neglect their allies, contacts, and peers can expect those relationships to degrade or vanish entirely. It is also likely that one of the heroes' allies might contact them for help. If the requested aid isn't forthcoming, the ally in question might very well reconsider their relationship with the character.

### STEP 5

## PLAYER REWARDS

While a single *Fantasy AGE* encounter is liable to provide players with only modest dividends, completing an entire adventure should be worth significantly more. As written in **CHAPTER 10** of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, these rewards are considered to be bonus XP. While these guidelines suggest awarding bonus experience points of no greater value than a hard encounter (400 XP) for the successful completion of an adventure, it is ultimately the Game Master's decision to make. If the adventure is particularly long or arduous, you may feel that your characters deserve a larger bonus.

Another option is to grant smaller bonus XP rewards when the characters reach predetermined milestones in the adventure. If you use the three-act adventure format, for example, you might award bonus XP when an act is completed. You can also award bonus XP when the party resolves specific story-related conflicts. Awarding experience points in smaller chunks like this allows for more gradual level advancement.

If you prefer to avoid keeping track of individual experience awards, you can instead grant a level to the heroes when they complete an adventure. You can even grant levels mid-adventure or following the completion of specific encounters, especially if you have designed future challenges with more experienced characters in mind. The important thing is to avoid stagnation while ensuring your players feel properly rewarded for their progress.

### ADVENTURE CREATION EXAMPLE

## STORMS ON THE HORIZON

It's all well and good to talk about creating adventures, but it's another thing entirely to put the steps into practice and design one yourself. While we won't be designing any encounters—that's a topic covered in depth in **CHAPTER 3: BUILDING ENCOUNTERS**—we can lay out the structure of an original adventure and put some of our new knowledge to good use.

In our example, GM Joe is preparing an adventure for his *Fantasy AGE* game. Joe decides in advance that he's going to use the three-act adventure format. This adventure is going to be set in a generic, unnamed fantasy realm, complete with the normal genre tropes, races, and (of course) magic. He also assumes that the characters are a balanced group of adventurers with heroic inclinations.

### STEP 1

## THE FORECAST CALLS FOR BRAINSTORMS

While brainstorming, Joe is struck by the idea that the local weather has been particularly bad lately. The forecast is always calling for rain and high winds, and he can't remember the last time he saw the sun peeking through the clouds. It's honestly been a bit depressing.

Joe wonders, given the climate's effect on him, what could severe weather do if magnified and unleashed upon his campaign world? Preventing the destruction of a kingdom due to catastrophic weather events sounds suitably epic, and this is where he decides to begin.

With that central conflict in mind, Joe quickly brainstorms some ideas:

tornados, air elementals, coven of witches, ruined harvest, threats of famine, merchants' guild, storm demon

After compiling a list of ideas, Joe examines what he's come up with. All of these can be tied fairly easily to extreme weather. He spitballs that perhaps the conditions are caused by a cabal of sorcerers who are working up the power to summon a demon of storms, a being who requires this extreme weather to manifest on the mortal plane. This is obviously a bad thing for the residents of the kingdom, especially the farmers who work the fields and the average citizens who depend upon those same farmers for food. As for the merchants' guild, Joe posits that perhaps a collective of farmers contacts the adventurers in an attempt to enlist their aid before things become too dire.

Now Joe knows the villain of the adventure is a cabal of sorcerers, and he knows their motive for magically creating extreme weather is to summon a storm demon. It's not a bad start, but it obviously needs to be fleshed out a bit more.

Who are these sorcerers? Is the cabal made up of wealthy aristocrats hungry for power, or are they marginalized peasants out for revenge? What do they hope to accomplish by summoning a storm demon? Do they want to bring about the end of the world, or are they more interested in currying favor with an otherworldly power—and if so, why? These aren't necessarily questions that need to be answered now, but Joe wants to have an idea of the whys and wherefores before he sits down to play through his adventure.

## STEP 2

### PLAYER INPUT & FEEDBACK

Joe's group of players (Amy, David, Jason, Karen, and Mary) recently wrapped up a long-term campaign with Amy as the Game Master. Given the opportunity, Joe would like to run his adventure to give his usual GM a break, and he asks for their input to help create the sort of game they will all enjoy. Amy is so thrilled to be playing for a change that she has all sorts of ideas for the character she wants to create!

Joe speaks to the rest of his players, providing a general premise:

*"The land is being ravaged by raging storms, torrential rain, and deadly tornadoes, brought about by some kind of horrible magic. Heroes who have tried to get to the bottom of these disasters have died or disappeared. You may be the only champions left who can put an end to the devastation!"*

Everyone seems excited by the story. Amy wants to play an elemental wizard with a vested interest in discovering the source of the extreme weather. David, on the other hand, is interested in playing a roguish character specializing in locks and traps. Karen enjoys combat and action, so she's going to play some sort of martial character. As long as there are enemies to fight, she'll be happy. Jason likes a good fight as much as Karen does, but he prefers to do battle in a strict, tactical fashion. As for Mary, she enjoys the social aspects of the game more than anything else, and she'll happily play any role that needs to be filled.

Given the group's preferences, it looks like Joe wants to base his story encounters around elemental magic, locks and traps, and a good amount of combat and action. The occasional unusual challenge will keep things interesting as well, but he wants everyone to have a chance to contribute.

## STEP 3

### A STORY OF STORMS

How do the players get involved in the adventure? What sort of hook brings them together? Once they've agreed to address the central conflict, how do they go about doing so? These are only a few of the nitty-gritty story details Joe needs to consider. He doesn't need to figure it all out up front, but he will need specifics as they appear.

Joe plans to improvise some of these elements during the game, but he also makes sure he takes ample notes on decisions he makes and ideas he puts into play. If not, he risks contradicting himself, which will confuse the players and could disrupt the adventure.

## ATMOSPHERE AND THEME

Since this adventure is about weather, it shouldn't be difficult for Joe to tie both the atmosphere and theme to storms and destruction. When creating flavor text and descriptions, Joe includes language that alludes to things like storm clouds, flashes of lightning, torrential rains, and gusting winds. For example, he favors descriptions like "The sorcerer wears a cloak the color of a seething raincloud" or "The cabal chants wicked words in an eldritch tongue, their voices rising like a screeching cyclone." He also makes a note to use such terms and images when running the adventure, even during improvised descriptions.

As far as the theme is concerned, the sky really is the limit. Joe considers if he wants to focus on something universal, such as the cabal's thirst for power or the plight of simple farmers in the face of the fury of nature. He also considers how he might make a statement about climate change, using the cabal and the storm demon as analogies for our own world's struggles against rising sea levels, floods, and ever-hotter summers. For now, since he is new as a GM for this group, he notes these ideas as possibilities and decides to see how his players react to various themes as they are presented.

## DEFINE CONFLICT AND HOOKS

Joe has already defined the basic premise of the adventure's conflict, namely a sorcerous cabal seeking to summon a storm demon. Now we need to draw the characters into the story with an appropriate hook. Amy's character, the elemental wizard, already has plenty of reason to be involved given her background and interest in the storm phenomena.

To bring the other characters into the fold, Joe has a couple of choices. He can work with them to create an existing group, all with ties to Amy's character, and allow them to start together and share her elemental wizard's goal. He could also have them start individually or in smaller groups, contacted by the farming collective he came up with in his brainstorm. Finally, he can leave it to the players to decide how they get involved. As the group has played together before, Joe decides to go this route, allowing each player to decide how they want to get involved. If necessary, he will run short preparatory vignettes to bring the characters together, but they might just explain how they met and start together.

## ADVENTURE OBJECTIVES & RESOLUTION

It's obvious, given what Joe has already established, that stopping the cabal from summoning the storm demon should be a large part of resolving the adventure's central conflict. Now Joe needs a rough idea of how the adventure is going to progress to that point. The characters won't start the game knowing about the cabal. All they know is that there are magical storms ravaging the countryside, so their first objective is to figure out what is happening behind the scenes. Once they begin to learn the truth behind the storms, Joe can plan a series of encounters leading them to a final showdown with the coven.

Providing the characters with relevant clues is one way to drive the narrative forward from the get-go to establish story

beats and encounters. The heroes can spend a little time investigating the farms that have been destroyed and talking to surviving farmers and their families about the events leading up to the storms. During their investigations, they discover the presence of ritual markings similar to crop circles. The markings always appear just before the magical storms take place.

Since two of Joe's players are interested in action, it doesn't hurt to throw in some excitement early on. If the cabal leaves supernatural guardians to oversee the crop circles, the characters have a high chance of stumbling upon them. In this case, one or two brief encounters with air elementals should do the trick. Depending on how quickly he wants to introduce the cabal, Joe might include one or two witches in one of these encounters as well.

Research into the ritual markings the characters found reveals their infernal origin. Further research reveals that only two sorcerous cabals are known to use such markings, and one of them is rumored to be active in the local area. While the characters follow up on leads and look for clues, the cabal becomes aware of their activities and decides to put an end to them before it's too late. This leads to another combat encounter, this time with several of the cabal members.

If the heroes withstand the villains' attack and either interrogate a captive or search the body of a slain sorcerer, they can learn more about their enemies, their intention to summon a powerful demon, and where the final ritual to summon their infernal master is going to take place. With no time to spare, they confront the coven amidst a roaring storm that threatens to tear apart a nearby hamlet, village, or city. If the characters cannot put an end to the ritual, the storm demon appears and attacks them.

## STORY BEATS AND ENCOUNTERS

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With the general plot laid out, Joe crafts an outline detailing story beats and encounters. The adventure is liable to be relatively short and well-contained, perhaps only six or seven encounters in total. Each story beat relates to one of the encounters.

Once distilled down into an outline, the adventure might look something like this:

- PCs are contacted by farmer's collective, asked to investigate storms
- Investigate storm site #1
- No survivors; discover remains of crop circle markings in nearby field
- Investigate storm site #2
- Speak to lone survivor, learn that strange chanting was heard in fields the night before the tornado hit
- Discover additional crop circle markings in direction where chanting was heard
- Encounter residual air elementals who attack the characters
- Return to city to research clues
- Discover nature of crop circle markings and the witch's coven they're related to



- Development: As the players research, a massive storm—larger than any before it—begins to coalesce over the city
- Ambushed by witches in city streets
- If the witches are defeated, PCs can locate clues (or interrogate witches) to learn location of final ritual
- PCs proceed to ritual location just as storm comes to a crescendo, battle is joined
- If, during the encounter, the leader of the witches is killed before the ritual is complete, the demon is not summoned
- If the leader of the witches successfully summons the storm demon, then the heroes must destroy it, or die trying
- Assuming the adventurers are successful, they are rewarded by the farming collective for their heroics

Designing the different encounters is Joe’s next task. Given the amount of detail that goes into creating encounters, this is liable to be where the bulk of his time is spent. Based on how his group handles adventures of a similar length, Joe expects the game to run a total of three sessions, with about two or three encounters each. This estimate might not be perfectly accurate, but it gives him an idea of how much time he has to fill.

#### STEP 4

### DEFINE IMPORTANT NPCs

Using the outline as a guide, Joe determines the NPCs he needs. As the farmer’s collective is likely employing the heroes in their task, he considers how it’s organized, who runs it, and how they present themselves. Are their motives true, or are one or more of its members cabal agents in disguise? Some of this information may lead to other encounters during the adventure, and Joe is ready to add to the outline if necessary.

Given its prominence in the story, Joe spends the most time creating the cabal and its members. He defines its leader, the rank-and-file members, and its general ideology and goals. He also gives them a distinct look, since he knows that uniforms, markings and tattoos, or masks can visually unify a group in his players’ imaginations. Unlike the representatives of the farmer’s collective, who aren’t likely to find themselves in combat with the party, Joe will need to create statistics and ability scores for at least a typical cabal member, with additional stat blocks for leaders and other unique individuals.

The characters are going to be talking to at least one farmer, Joe knows, so they must be detailed and ready to go. He writes down some notes about them, including their name, age and appearance, and a brief backstory. Joe decides this farmer has lost family members to these unnatural storms, and he details which of their relatives has perished and how.

Lastly, if the characters can’t stop the coven’s final ritual, they’ll be forced to fight the storm demon. Joe scouts the *Fantasy AGE*

*Bestiary* and CHAPTER 9: ADVERSARIES of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and decides he can use an air-based djinn from the *Bestiary* for the storm demon, possibly using the *Basic Rulebook* rules in the **Beefing Up Adversaries** section to make it a bit tougher and adding additional weather-based spells and powers. Joe could instead make his own storm demon from scratch, but he already has a lot on his plate designing this adventure, and he decides the “easy” route gets him everything he needs for the monster. Also, as the heroes are starting out as low-level characters, anything more dangerous runs the risk of slaughtering the group. A single Moderate threat with some extra abilities should provide a serious challenge, especially since even a single casting of a potent weather-based spell such as Lightning Storm could cause the party serious injury.

The heroes are obviously going to run into several other NPCs, but most of these are minor players in the story. Joe doesn’t worry too much about these characters, though he does jot down names and brief descriptions of the local librarian, town mayor, and captain of the guard, figuring it’s likely at least one of the characters will seek out these individuals or attract their attention. He also considers whether one or more of these individuals may secretly be members of the cabal, and he decides the captain of the guard makes for an effective and unpredictable secret sorcerer.

#### STEP 5

### PLAYER REWARDS

After Joe finishes the rest of the adventure, he thinks about how to reward the party for completing it. He decides successfully completing the adventure should award them enough experience points to go up a level, giving them an early boost in the new campaign.

Additional rewards might include reputation and standing with the locals, especially if a character acts particularly heroically. The heroes may even be invited to become guardians of the town, which can afford them certain privileges. The heroes are liable to want to be paid for their efforts, and so Joe should figure out how much coin their success can earn them, both as a single reward and for an extended position. Joe also gives the cabal a few minor magical items the adventurers can claim if the sorcerers are slain, such as a cloak that affords immunity to all normal weather effects (and a bonus to resisting weather-based magical effects) and a ring that grants +1 Spellpower with all Air and Lighting Arcana spells. He also decides that the cabal’s secrets, including information that may lead to future adventures, are kept inside a locked vault in the guard captain’s cellar. If the characters can open the lock, they’ll receive more treasure and a coded journal that details the cabal’s membership and activities. If they try to spring the lock and fail, the enchanted locks destroy the journal and leave them with some valuable slag from melted jewelry and coin, but little else. Fortunately, Joe’s group has a lock expert, so he believes it’s likely the characters will receive this information—which, of course, leads to Joe’s next adventure...



## BUILDING ENCOUNTERS

**E**ncounters are the bread and butter of roleplaying games. A typical game session can include multiple encounters, each with a different challenge or story beat. Linked together, individual encounters become adventures, which in turn transform into entire campaigns. Knowing how to properly design an encounter is a skill that every Game Master should have. That said, there isn't a right or wrong way to design encounters so long as you and your players are having fun.

This chapter walks you through encounter design, giving you an overview of the building blocks you have at your disposal. It discusses different types of encounters, along with ways you might combine them to create interesting and novel events for your players (and their characters) to participate in. It also includes advice on rewarding your players for a job well done and provides an example of creating an encounter from the ground up.

### USING ENCOUNTERS

Encounters are similar to scenes from a movie or television show. Individually, they provide your players with story beats and opportunities for action. When connected together, they create a broader narrative that can inform the overall plot of an entire adventure. Just as with a movie, every scene has a purpose, which is generally to drive the plot forward. Even minor encounters can be evocative and interesting, and every character should have a part to play in the action.

### ENCOUNTER PURPOSE

When designing an encounter, consider its purpose in your game. Is the encounter meant to reveal something to the players? Is it an obstacle they must overcome to reach their objective? Is it specific to a single member of the adventuring party, or do the implications of the encounter affect everyone?

While it isn't necessary for every encounter to touch on your storyline in some way, the majority of the scenes you present should relate to your players' goals. This provides your players with a consistent storyline and allows them to focus their energy on their overarching objectives. Too many unrelated encounters can slow player progress and water down the narrative. Players crave a sense of accomplishment, and providing them with encounters that advance the storyline is a good way to promote such feelings.

### ONE-OFF ENCOUNTERS

One-off encounters are often unrelated to the storyline of your game. They can occur under a number of circumstances, such as when your players go off the rails (See **Going Off the Rails** in **CHAPTER 2: BUILDING THE ADVENTURE**) or when you include a random encounter of some kind to liven up your current session. Sometimes they present themselves organically, such as when your players initiate a conversation with a random NPC, fail an important skill test, or go looking for trouble in places you didn't intend them to go.



As the GM, you may also decide that a one-off encounter is necessary to provide your players with a break from a particularly heavy plot. For example, if your adventure has become oversaturated with grim, serious drama, an amusing encounter can provide a little comic relief to lighten the mood around your table. Likewise, if there hasn't been a combat encounter for some time, it's perfectly fine to throw a little bit of action your players' way.

## FROM ONE-OFF TO LONG-TERM

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While a one-off encounter of any kind might be unrelated to your story initially, it needn't stay that way. If you aren't opposed to sending your adventurers off in another direction for a while, a one-off encounter might be just the catalyst you need. There are several reasons you might want to branch the story you're telling. Perhaps the characters need to pass a significant amount of in-game time. Instead of glossing over the intervening hours, days, weeks, or months, you can present them with a new adventure to keep them busy. Likewise, if your players are missing all your carefully placed clues and going off in the wrong direction, why not put their misspent energy to good use?

Though this sort of diversion might distract from the overarching plot of your adventure or campaign, this isn't always a bad thing. Characters on long-term quests can benefit from a change of pace and some new scenery. Providing a diversion in such a situation can also add energy to a narrative that might be bogged down. As Game Master, you might begin to hunger for a vacation from the story you've been telling. Even if none of these problems plague your game, adding a new subplot can inform your players that the world their characters live in is filled with opportunities for adventure.

## INCIDENTAL ENCOUNTERS

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You can't possibly plan for every encounter, especially those initiated by your PCs. Most of the time, incidental encounters with shopkeepers, bartenders, authority figures, or other strangers can be glossed over with little or no exposition. For example, one of your characters wants to sell some gems and buy a new broadsword. It's often enough to tell the player how much he can sell the gems for and how much a new broadsword costs. But what happens when the character wants to haggle or banter?

For roleplayers and actors, such mundane run-ins allow them to stretch their acting muscles. For other players, especially those on the sidelines, such hijinks can quickly become tedious. Unless there is potential in the encounter for some tangible reward—new information, a potential ally, or the like—it's always best to keep it brief. Getting things moving again is oftentimes as simple as saying, "The shopkeeper thanks you for your business and leaves to help another customer."

Incidental encounters don't always begin and end with a friendly conversation. Characters who break the law in public, whether by picking someone's pocket or causing a scene, can attract unwanted attention from the authorities. Nothing slows a story down more than a night in jail or, worse yet, a murder trial. As the Game Master, it's up to you to narrate such encounters toward an acceptable conclusion.

If your players enjoy flaunting the rule of law while in town, they had best be prepared to bear the consequences.

## VARYING ENCOUNTERS

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Depending on your style as a Game Master and the preferences of your players, the characters may spend more time roleplaying than slaying goblins or exploring crumbling ruins. That said, it's important to present your players with a variety of encounter types over the course of a game session. This gives your game a dynamic feeling, like anything can happen. It also keeps everyone engaged and on their toes, and prevents players who prefer certain types of encounters over others from getting bored.

## ENCOUNTER TYPES

Encounters are broken up into several types, each with one or more specific objectives. Once you have an idea of the types of encounters you have in your toolbox, it's simply a matter of choosing one and filling in the details. You can even combine encounter types if you wish, though they often take on a life of their own once the heroes are involved. After all, it's quite possible for a roleplaying encounter to go south and turn into a combat encounter, or for a combat encounter to transform into a chase. In a roleplaying game, anything is possible, which is why it's so much fun!

Encounter types often blur into one another seamlessly. For instance, a specter attacks the characters as they explore a haunted manor house. The specter initiates a combat encounter, but there's still a good bit of manor that requires exploration once the fighting is over. Or, instead of attacking, the specter communicates with the party, starting a roleplaying encounter between the characters and the apparition.

When using different encounter types, it's important to understand that the type of encounter defines the focus of the scene you're playing out. While roleplaying or combat can occur during an exploration encounter, the characters' objective during the scene remains focused on exploration. That said, don't feel constrained by the different encounter types. Use them as a tool to support your story, and allow them to assist you in defining the narrative.

In addition to the three types of encounters mentioned in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*—combat, exploration, and roleplaying—we're going to explore a couple of additional encounter types.

## CHASE ENCOUNTERS

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A chase encounter is exactly what it sounds like. When an NPC flees and the heroes follow, it results in a chase encounter. Likewise, if the protagonists bump into a large group of orcs they cannot possibly overcome, they might toss valor to the wind and attempt to make their escape. The objective of a chase encounter is simple enough—one side wants to catch the other.

Mechanically, a chase encounter comes down to a series of opposed ability tests, typically using Constitution (Running). Of course, if the characters are using different types of move-

ment, such as riding animals or sailing boats, you should use an ability that makes sense under the circumstances. You also want to keep track of degrees of success during the encounter.

Each round in which the pursuit continues, the participants must use their major actions to run and attempt the appropriate opposed ability test. When doing so, each pursuer compares their result (and the degree of success, in the event of a tie) to the result of each individual they're chasing. The first participant to reach five successful rolls wins the contest. If the fleeing individual wins, they get away. If one of the pursuers wins, they catch up with the target. If one of multiple pursuers catches a single target, the GM needs to see where the other pursuers are in terms of current successes. If they have only a few successes, they'll likely miss the post-chase encounter as they struggle to catch up. If they have three or four successes, they enter later in the encounter. When they enter exactly is at the GM's discretion and depends on overall distance, terrain, and other factors.

## COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

Though fighting isn't the only thing the characters should be doing during a well-rounded adventure, a good combat encounter can be one of the more enjoyable (and memorable) events of a game session. When constructing a combat encounter, it's perfectly reasonable to make it a simple struggle between the adventurers and a group of enemies. However, these sorts of fights quickly become rote, and it's not difficult to spice up a combat encounter by using some interesting terrain or unusual tactics.

## BATTLES

Fantasy fiction is filled with huge armies fighting epic battles against one another. The majority of combat encounters in a fantasy RPG involve the heroes fighting against one or more enemies, but typically in relatively small numbers. By contrast, the chaos of open warfare, where thousands fight and die around the heroes, can be an impressive and unforgettable event.

Encounters set in the midst of a major battle should be fluid and focused on specific goals. Denying tactical advantages to the enemy, disabling one or more siege engines, or defeating an enemy leader to weaken their morale are just a few examples of relevant encounters. During such events, you need only focus on your characters and the events immediately surrounding them.

## DUELS

The direct opposite of a massive battle is a one-on-one duel between characters. As part of the larger narrative or related to a single character's backstory, a duel can be a tense and pivotal encounter. The most difficult part for you

as the Game Master is ensuring the other players are engaged in the action, despite the fact they're not actually fighting. The secret is to keep the action moving at a quick pace and to make sure the encounter doesn't last too long.

Duels needn't be to the death. In many cases, first blood is enough to bring satisfaction to those involved. The drama of the event can cause the stakes to rise dramatically, especially if one of the parties attempts to goad his opponent into making a critical mistake. The ability tests made during a duel go beyond weapon skills and should include Communication, Intelligence, Perception, and Willpower focuses.

## EXPLORATION ENCOUNTERS

The greatest adventures are more than just a series of combat encounters strung together like bloody beads on a cord. Exploration—of cities, ruins, caves, dungeons, and ultimately the *world*—is one of the major building blocks of roleplaying games. When the characters light their torches and uncoil ropes to descend into places best left forgotten, they're about to embark on an exploration encounter. Exploration encounters run the gamut from mapping an unknown area to solving





ancient riddles and puzzles. The enjoyment comes from overcoming obstacles—traps, creatures, hazards, and enigmas—and the discoveries that ultimately result from those efforts.

## HAZARD ENCOUNTERS

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Hazards are usually treated as components of an encounter, but they don't have to be. Large hazards—forest fires, burning houses, city-spanning earthquakes, violent weather like hurricanes and tornados—can provide your characters with plenty of excitement. Whether they're searching for a safe place to hide or attempting to rescue NPCs put into peril by the hazard in question, the heroes should have their work cut out for them.

Unlike living enemies, hazards can't be reasoned with or easily avoided. They are, quite literally, forces of nature that threaten everything in their domain. This doesn't mean you shouldn't personify them in your descriptions—quite the opposite, in fact. A storm that “howls like a million demons” or a fire that “roars like a dragon” is much more threatening and evocative, and it gives the heroes additional incentive to respect their dire situation.

## ROLEPLAYING ENCOUNTERS

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Roleplaying encounters are primarily concerned with the players acting in their characters' roles in order to achieve an objective. Though game mechanics such as ability tests

may intrude momentarily, much can be accomplished by characters who use their words rather than their weapons. A great deal of the enjoyment derived from roleplaying games comes from verbal encounters where not a drop of blood is spilled.

Despite the focus on roleplaying encounters in the games we play, not every player is given the gift of gab. Some players prefer to sit quietly and observe as their more verbose companions take center stage in interactions. There's nothing wrong with this, but you should attempt to draw them into roleplaying encounters whenever you feel it's appropriate to do so.

As mentioned, ability tests are often made during roleplaying encounters. Even if a given player is shy or not eloquent in her speech, her character—with a Communication of 4 and an ability focus in Persuasion—should be. Rather than forcing her to roleplay, a player in this situation should be allowed to instead explain what her character is trying to convey when making an ability test to persuade an NPC.

## HYBRID ENCOUNTERS

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When choosing what type of encounter you want to plan next, you might have trouble narrowing down the options available. What if the characters are dead set on interrogating an evil baron, but he's not about to invite them in for afternoon tea? That's where hybrid encounters come into play. To make a hybrid encounter, simply take two (or more) encounter types and combine them. This places the focus of the encounter on two different objectives.

## HOW MUCH DETAIL IS ENOUGH?

The work you put into designing your first encounter depends a great deal on you. Some GMs prefer to write down every detail and plan for multiple eventualities. Others outline the highlights of an encounter and fill in the rest of the details on the fly. Still other Game Masters don't seem to plan at all and run their games completely off the cuff.

When you're just starting out, it's a good idea to write down everything you think you'll need. As you run more game sessions and design more encounters, you'll get a feel for the amount of preparation you'll need.

In the example above, the evil baron wants to see the heroes defeated. However, being evil, he's all too happy to gloat from a distance while his minions attempt to send the heroes to early graves. As they whittle down the baron's defenders, the heroes are free to converse with their overconfident nemesis. If the characters play their cards right, the baron might spill the beans before he realizes his plans to kill them have failed. This results in a hybrid combat/roleplaying encounter.

In another example, the heroes are sent to a magical tower to locate a hermit who has information they require. In order to locate the hermit, the adventurers are subjected to a series of riddles posed by the hermit's disembodied voice. They can speak with the hermit during these exchanges, possibly gaining additional clues to solve the riddles he's asking them. This results in a hybrid exploration/roleplaying encounter.

Hybrid encounters are great for spicing up a game, especially when the characters are used to handling one thing at a time. Providing them with multiple goals at the same time, especially if those goals conflict or enhance one another, gives you more bang for your encounter bucks.

## AVOIDING ENCOUNTERS

Eventually your characters are going to completely bypass one of your encounters. They might examine the opposition in a particularly challenging combat encounter and decide to try a different approach. It's also possible they'll walk right past an important roleplaying encounter despite your best efforts to attract their attention. Players are like that—they don't always do what you expect them to do.

When this happens, you might be tempted to steer them back to the encounter by offering them no other alternative. While it might provide you with immediate satisfaction, the players are going to be well aware that you not so subtly put them back on track. This method of game mastering is often referred to as "railroading," for obvious reasons, and you should avoid it at all costs.

Part of a player's enjoyment of a game is the illusion of a fantasy world that is wide open, where they can try to do anything their heart desires. By failing to give them the opportunity to explore or not allowing them to attempt alternate methods you hadn't planned for, you're taking away their freedom of choice and forcing them down a specific path. Players hate that sort of thing.

The point of the game, outside of telling a rollicking good story, is to have fun. If your players aren't having fun because you forced them to follow the golden path, then you haven't properly done your job. To make sure you provide your players with the freedom they desire, take a moment to consider their

alternate plan and determine if it has any chance of success. If the answer is yes, adapt your encounters to take their plans into account.

Remind yourself what the purpose of the encounter is. For example, if there are several heavily armed guards protecting a door the characters need to get through, the objective is simple: get through the door. The guards are just obstacles to be overcome to achieve that goal. If your heroes decide they'd rather not fight the guards and come up with an alternate plan to bypass them, there's no harm in letting them try.

## ENDING AN ENCOUNTER

When does an encounter end? Simply put, it ends whenever you want it to. However, keep your players in mind when determining whether or not you want to extend an encounter or cut it short. Are your players still enjoying the encounter? Do they seem bored and listless? Is the outcome of the encounter all but certain? Consider these questions so you can make an informed decision.

Encounters are meant to be self-contained and finite. A combat encounter that goes on and on quickly grows stale, even if the heroes are winning. Similarly, an exploration encounter where the characters become lost or stuck and consistently fail the necessary ability tests to notice a secret door leaves them flailing, helpless, and frustrated. Having their remaining enemies surrender, or allowing the characters to notice the secret door despite the die rolls, ends the encounter in question and allows the story to progress.

## ENCOUNTER DESIGN

As a Game Master, you'll be designing a lot of encounters. One of the rewards you'll appreciate as a GM is watching your players explore the game world through the encounters you create for them. While you don't need to carefully craft every single encounter you create, taking extra time to work on the most important ones definitely pays off in the end. Your players will notice the extra detail you weave into your game, and they're going to love you for it.

The following section presents the steps of designing an encounter. After presenting each step, we'll detail the processes involved. These guidelines ultimately serve as tools, not a strict checklist. Every Game Master has their own methods for designing encounters. If you find that some (or all) of this process doesn't work for you, throw it out and do things your own way. With time, you'll find what works best for you and your style of Game Mastering. Remember, if you and your players are enjoying the encounters you design, then you're probably doing a fine job.

## STEP 1

### BRAINSTORM THE ENCOUNTER

Brainstorming is a method of gathering many different ideas together to solve a problem. In this case, the problem is creating an engaging encounter, and brainstorming is a way of coming up with ideas for that encounter. It's possible you already have the broad strokes worked out in your head. That's fine, too. You can use brainstorming to round out your encounter idea and add details you might not have considered before.

The quality of your ideas isn't as important as the number of ideas you come up with. Think of the encounter you want to create and jot down any thoughts and ideas that come to mind. Try to reserve your judgment until later, and don't immediately dismiss your ideas out of hand. After all, ideas that seem unhelpful at first might prove useful with further thought and development. Feel free to borrow ideas from other encounters, movies, television shows, books, video games, and even dreams.

As you come up with new ideas, record them on a piece of paper or in a computer document. When you feel you have enough, review each one and look for ways to combine them with one another. Try to think outside the box. Look at your list from different perspectives, and consider how your players might react to the elements you're considering. Pick as many as you feel you need for the encounter at hand, and then save the rest for another day.

## STEP 2

### DEFINE ITS PLACE IN THE STORY

Next, consider the encounter's place in the story you're telling. What purpose does the encounter serve? Is it pivotal to the overall story? Is it an event that's bound to shape the course of the adventure? Is it related to the overarching plot the adventurers are involved in, or does it pertain to a single character's backstory? Is it meant to spur a new avenue of exploration, or to provide further opportunities to move an existing plot forward? How have prior events in your game shaped the encounter or led up to it?

Defining what the encounter means in the overall scheme of your narrative brings you one step closer to choosing the type of encounter you want to design.

#### DEFINING THE STAKES

What happens if the heroes fail to overcome an encounter? Can they make further attempts or try new approaches if their initial efforts fall flat?

If luck doesn't favor the characters, the encounter may very well end in failure. Depending on the circumstances, they may be able to return later and attempt to resolve the conflict again. Take some time to consider what might happen if the heroes fail, even if such an eventuality seems far-fetched. Will the orcs be able to summon reinforcements? Or will they celebrate their victory with too much drink and pose less of a threat to the adventurers when they return?

If you're designing the encounter for a one-shot game and don't plan to tie it to a larger adventure or campaign, you can probably skip this step.

## STEP 3

### DEFINE THE CONFLICT

What are the party's goals in the encounter? What's stopping them from achieving their goals? Why? This defines the encounter's conflict and determines exactly what the characters must do in order to progress.

Every encounter has some sort of conflict. Conflict presents the obstacles your heroes must resolve in order to succeed. Sources of conflict include anything that stands in the characters' way: Enemies, hazards, traps, and even well-intentioned friends can provide conflict in the right circumstances. It's possible that there is some conflict within the adventuring party itself. For example, maybe the party's warrior wants to kill the evil baron, while the rest of the heroes want to bring him to justice.

Presenting conflict is about more than putting a band of orcs between your players and their objective. Obviously, the orcs are there to prevent the characters from achieving their goals, but even so, you need to ask yourself, "Why do the orcs want to stop the heroes from achieving their goal?" By answering that question, you can determine other methods the players might use to circumvent the orcs.

Let's say the orcs were given a lot of gold by the evil baron to keep the heroes from their goal. This reveals that the orcs are mercenaries, and canny players might be able to avoid a fight by bribing them. In another example, let's assume the adventurers are attempting to explore an ancient tomb that is sacred to the orcs. In this case, the orcs are motivated by pride in their ancestors and religious fervor, and it's unlikely they can be bribed to stand aside.

It's also possible for an encounter to include more than one conflict. In the above example, let's assume the orcs have been well paid by the evil baron. Their loyalty to the baron more or less hinges on how much he's paying them. However, let's assume that one of the heroes has vowed to kill any orc that crosses their path. This presents an additional conflict, as the individual in question would rather see the orcs dead than waste good money on bribing them.

## STEP 4

### DETERMINE HOW TO RESOLVE THE CONFLICT

Step back and inspect the encounter's conflict from different angles. Are there ways the characters might approach the conflict that you haven't considered? What happens if they fail to resolve the conflict? Can they try again, or are they out of luck?

Generally speaking, every encounter should have one or more potential resolutions. In the case of the well-paid orcs, the most obvious resolution is that the characters kill them. The heroes may also attempt to bribe them into letting them pass. If one of the characters is particularly intimidating, the

## UNBALANCED ENCOUNTERS

Sometimes you might overestimate the heroes or underestimate the challenges they face, leading to an unbalanced encounter. In other cases, you might be using a pre-written encounter that's way out of your party's league. No matter the circumstances, you have options. One alternative is to alter the encounter right then and there. Reduce the power level of the enemies, lower relevant target numbers, or provide the players with some kind of dramatic benefit that evens the odds. This latter option is a good tactic, especially if you can tie it to the story.

Another option is to fudge the rolls you make, though this should only be done when necessary. To fudge a roll, ignore the actual dice results you get and replace them with results of your own choosing. For instance, you might want to ignore an enemy's critical hit against a hero, especially if it's liable to disable or kill a character. Fudging is an especially valuable tool for keeping the party alive in bad situations, but it almost always requires you to hide your rolls or use a GM screen. Never let your players know that you're taking it easy on them, either.

### INTENTIONALLY UNBALANCED ENCOUNTERS

Why would a GM intentionally create an unbalanced encounter? While it's a good idea to keep your encounters balanced and in line with the capabilities of your characters, the occasional unbalanced encounter can be an important story tool. For example, imagine you're introducing a villain into your adventure. You may want your heroes to see just how formidable he is or what sorts of resources he can draw upon to foil their plans. Perhaps there's a location you don't want your players going to right away – by placing a powerful monster or other obstacle in the way, you can prevent them from doing so.

However, you should take great care when designing such encounters. Players hate to feel railroaded into a course of action, so it pays to be subtle. In the case of the powerful monster, ensure that everyone hears tales of the ferocious beast well before they head off in that direction. It also pays to offer a way around the obstacle that requires your characters to perform some other task, such as locating a magical weapon that can slay the beast or some other item that holds the creature at bay so the heroes can get by.

In the case of introducing a powerful villain in dramatic fashion, make sure the characters understand that engaging in a fight at that moment would be nigh-suicidal. Sure, there's a chance they might succeed, but there's also a pretty good chance that they won't. In any case, you don't want to force their hand. Let them decide whether or not to engage. If they flee, allow them to get away. If they decide to fight against the odds, pull your punches just enough to show them the bad guys mean business. Give them plenty of chances to retreat, or allow the villain to escape while leaving minions to finish the job.

Though unbalanced encounters can be useful on occasion, you should avoid employing them too often. Coming up against too many insurmountable challenges frustrates players, and being frustrated isn't much fun.

party may attempt to frighten the orcs off, and so on and so forth. Once the adventurers resolve the encounter, in whatever way they decide to, the encounter is over.

When designing your encounter, you should have a good idea of the circumstances under which the players succeed or fail. If the encounter features multiple conflicts, you'll need to decide how each one can be addressed.

#### STEP 5

### DETAIL THE CHALLENGES

At this point, your encounter's concept should be fairly well defined. Now it's time to define the conflict of the encounter in mechanical terms, selecting or creating the adversaries, hazards, traps, and other challenges your characters must contend with during the encounter.

Take each challenge the characters are liable to face—the traps, hazards, adversaries, and other components—and detail it in mechanical terms. This is a fairly simple step in the overall scheme of things. It doesn't require much work unless you plan to create the encounter's challenges from scratch. Though creating your own obstacles isn't difficult, it's often simpler and easier to use pre-designed obstacles for your first few encounters.

The most important thing to consider when choosing or designing hazards, creatures, traps, and the like is balance. You need to carefully consider how powerful the heroes are in relation to the obstacles you intend to set them against. If you put your party up against obstacles that are too difficult for them to overcome, they won't stand a chance. In the same vein, encounters that aren't challenging enough quickly become rote and tiresome. It's never a good idea to put the characters up against an obstacle they have no hope of overcoming unless you don't intend them to succeed, and even then there should always be some chance of success.

When selecting creatures and other foes for a combat encounter, pay close attention to their Threat levels. As you do so, keep in mind that an adversary's Threat level is only a general indication of the challenge presented by a creature. You also need to consider the combat capabilities of your party in relation to the enemy. It can take a bit of practice to ensure combats are both challenging and balanced for your players. That said, the more combat encounters you design and play through, the better able you'll be to gauge your characters' prowess.

When designing noncombat encounter elements, such as hazards, traps, or riddles, or selecting an NPC's skill at dialogue or resistance to coercion, you don't have the luxury of Threat levels. What you do have, however, is the group of heroes themselves. It's always a good idea to keep a copy of

In some cases you aren't going to have a lot of time (or warning) to prepare an encounter. In these instances, which usually happen during play, it's important to stay on your toes and remain flexible. Designing encounters on the fly isn't much different than creating them ahead of time and uses a similar process. When these situations occur during play, taking notes about locations, character names, and events is incredibly helpful, especially if you want to maintain consistency in the future.

each player's character sheet for reference, especially when tailoring encounters to match their capabilities. Look at each character's ability scores, focuses, special powers, and equipment. Take note of their strengths and weaknesses, as well as what their average ability test results are. Keep this information in mind when determining the target numbers in your encounter. Let's say, for example, the heroes must disarm a trap in order to complete the encounter, and the highest Dexterity (Traps) score in the party comes out to +5. Adding an average 3d6 result of 10 or 11, you can rely on that player getting a result of 15 (a Hard test difficulty) or more most of the time. If you really want to challenge the players, add a couple of points to the test's target number. If you want to give them a break, subtract a couple of points instead.

#### STEP 6

### SET THE SCENE

Imagine the encounter's location as clearly as you can, then write a detailed description of the location. You can also jot down relevant notes that you can refer to when describing the location during play. If the location includes different areas (rooms, caves, clearings, and so on), you might want to do the same for each area.

Your players need to know what their characters see and hear before, during, and after an encounter. Vivid and flavorful descriptions of people, places, and things provide important details and root your players' imaginations in the game world. Even if you're not much of a writer, you can still make your encounters more engaging by providing relevant details about their surroundings.

Without enough description, your players are liable to miss important details. Worse, they may fill in the blanks themselves and make assumptions about the environment. On the opposite end of the spectrum, providing too much description can cause information overload and slow the tempo of the game. Ensuring you provide just enough information to keep your players informed and awake is a fine line to walk, but it's something you'll become more practiced with over time.

First, make a list of salient details your players need to know, such as the number of foes they see, obvious hazards, light sources, and major features of the landscape (structures, terrain features, and so forth). Next, take into account things like temperature, smells, and ambient noise. Is it hot or cold? Does the air smell fresh or foul? Is there an omnipresent sound of dripping water or howling wind? If so, write those details down, too.

You can then take these elements and write a brief descriptive blurb—two or three sentences is usually more than enough—that you can read to your players. You can also keep

the general notes handy and describe everything in a more free-form manner. In either case, your players may have questions about what they see, hear, smell, and feel. Take time to answer these questions as best as you can, and make notes of your answers for reference so you can include similar details in future descriptions.

#### STEP 7

### DRAW A MAP

It's possible that you'll want to draw a detailed map of the encounter location, especially if the encounter is geared toward exploration or combat. Determine important spots on the map, such as the locations of any enemies, traps, or hazards the players are liable to come into contact with.

In particularly detailed encounters, it pays to have a map of the location handy. If you plan to run combat encounters using miniatures, a map is almost always a necessity. Maps provide your players with additional details and show them where things are in relation to one another. A map also gives them some idea of scale as well as distances between points.

You can create map in a number of different ways. Graph paper and a pencil is a tried-and-true method for drawing maps. Illustration software is also useful for designing simple maps, and more powerful programs can allow for greater detail and quality if you know how to use them. There are also programs specifically for creating fantasy maps, and some are even available at no cost.

#### STEP 8

### DETERMINE THE REWARDS

The *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* discusses awarding experience points to your players based on the difficulty of the encounter. The specified amounts are a good starting point, but they're not much more than ballpark figures. In the end, you'll need to consider how the events of the encounter played out and how much difficulty your players experienced during play. Similarly, if the players were clever and managed to avoid a difficult encounter altogether, you still need to reward them appropriately for their ingenuity.

You'll also want to take into account the encounter's perceived difficulty—the difficulty of the encounter as viewed through the eyes of your players. Sometimes, even simple encounters can prove a challenge for adventurers who are unlucky, unskilled, or both. While you shouldn't reward players for being bullheaded or obtuse, they might very well feel cheated if they earn a relatively low number of experience points for an encounter they fought tooth and nail to complete.

Beyond experience, it also pays to provide physical rewards to the heroes. In the case of treasure or magic items, attempt to tailor such rewards to the characters. By doing so, you can guarantee that every player in the group gets a useful material reward rather than a random trinket they'll probably never use. Further, by specifically describing each item to its intended recipient, you can avoid them squabbling over items.

A more detailed discussion of crafting rewards can be found in **CHAPTER 6: BUILDING REWARDS**.

## ENCOUNTER TYPE GUIDELINES

By now you know what sort of encounter you're going to be designing. The following entries delve a little deeper into the different kinds of encounters and explore options for each of them.

### CHASE ENCOUNTERS

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What ultimately makes chase encounters interesting isn't merely the thrill of the pursuit. Rather, it's the environment the chase takes place in. Whether the heroes are chasing a thief through a crowded market square or pushing their horses to catch up to a mounted bandit weaving between the trees of a darkling wood, it's up to you to make the event an exciting and visually interesting experience.

Like a real chase in your favorite action film, you want the encounter to be exciting. Throw challenges at both your PCs and the NPCs that are running from (or after) them—a traffic jam in a busy intersection, a gulley hidden by the forest's underbrush, or a merchant sloop suddenly blocking the waterway. A failed skill check to avoid an obstacle may reduce a participant's number of accrued successes, or it might even end the chase prematurely.

Don't forget to give the players alternative paths, such as potential shortcuts that might grant them an automatic success or two. Ensure that you require an appropriate ability test to achieve such a benefit, such as a successful Dexterity (Acrobatics), Intelligence (Navigation), Perception (Seeing), or Strength (Jumping) test.

### COMBAT ENCOUNTERS

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The first thing to consider when designing a combat encounter is the kinds of enemies your heroes will be facing. The type of enemy, be it a monster, a group of bandits, or a posse of angry villagers, should make sense both given the story you're telling and with respect to the events that have transpired up to this point in the game. Put yourself in the enemies' shoes for a moment and ask yourself, "What is our goal? Why do we want to fight? Are we hardened combatants? Under what circumstances will we surrender or run away?"

Keep the answers to these questions in mind as the combat encounter progresses. In doing so, you make the adversaries more than just a momentary distraction for your heroes. In

effect, they become three-dimensional beings with wants, needs, and limits. This information also informs you whether or not the characters can reason with their enemies, should they wish to avoid combat entirely.

Once you have the enemies and their motivations clear in your head, it's time to consider the environment the encounter takes place in. Take some time to imagine the location in your mind. What's the terrain like? Are there any obstacles nearby? How about hazards that might affect the combatants? Every detail you add to the location gives both the heroes and their enemies options, and options are what make combat encounters fresh and entertaining.

### EXPLORATION ENCOUNTERS

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Exploration encounters are about discovery, so it's fair to ask yourself, "What are the characters trying to discover?" Once you have that answer, ask yourself another question: "What must the party do in order to succeed in their discovery?" After all, any character that takes the time to crawl around a cave filled with hungry trolls or flesh-eating worms should be properly rewarded for the effort.

Consider the difficulty and risks involved in exploring the location you've chosen. Are they commensurate to the value of the information, loot, or prestige the heroes are liable to gain? You want to ensure that whatever the characters come away with once the exploration encounter is finished is worth the effort they put into finding it.

The opposition characters face during exploration encounters can run the gamut from traps and hazards to dangerous monsters. Obviously you want to challenge your heroes and make them expend some effort for their eventual rewards, but such structural concerns have absolutely nothing to do with the story your players are immersed in. Sure, a deadly pendulum trap dripping with viscous poison is neat, but why is it there? What is it protecting?

Take a moment to consider why so many traps, hazards, or enemies are there in the first place, and make sure the reasoning makes sense. For example, if the players are to meet up with an ogre in a series of caves, what is the ogre doing there? Are the caves his home? Did he wander into them looking for food and get lost? Was he hired by an evil wizard as a guard? Ask the same sorts of questions about the traps and hazards you plan to use.

Lastly, you'll want to create some kind of map. Even if your game doesn't use miniatures for tracking movement and combat, you'll want to know the environment's layout. The map doesn't need to be incredibly detailed, but it should show you where the important locations are. Use the map to determine where any monsters, hazards, or traps are. Are there secret passages? Concealed doors? If so, include those, too.

### ROLEPLAYING ENCOUNTERS

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In crafting roleplaying encounters, consider the same sorts of questions as when designing combat encounters. What are the NPC's goals? Whose side are they on? What do they stand to gain from helping or hindering the heroes? How do they feel about the heroes? What is their emotional state?



As you portray the characters the protagonists interact with, keep their wants and needs in mind. This, in conjunction with their emotional state and opinion of the heroes, should provide you with a solid starting point for the conversation at hand. These initial impressions determine the conversation's initial mood, from friendly and relaxed to tense and adversarial.

During a roleplaying encounter, you might ask your players to roll certain ability tests. If the characters are attempting to con their way into the evil baron's keep, it's reasonable to expect they succeed at one or more Communication (Deception) tests. If they want to frighten a stable hand into revealing their master's secret cache of silver, the heroes probably need to succeed at a Strength (Intimidation) test.

That said, sometimes a roleplayed conversation evolves in such a way that an NPC naturally bends to the heroes' whims. In such an instance, it's up to you as the Game Master to determine if the heroes have made their case effectively using conversation alone. You can still make them roll an ability test to succeed, but you might consider giving them a bonus to their roll.

As the conversation evolves, try to keep it focused on the matters at hand. While it can be amusing to have aimless conversations with NPCs, there will always be players who'd rather be swinging swords or exploring ancient ruins. If the conversation begins to wander, get it back on track. If one side or the other (or both) have achieved their goals during the encounter, end the conversation while it still feels fresh.

#### ENCOUNTER EXAMPLE

## SWAMPING THE CASTLE

As an example of the process explained in this chapter, let's go over the steps of designing a new encounter from scratch. We'll walk through the design and describe each step in detail, and while we won't be detailing the encounter in its entirety, the information provided can be used as a "head start" if you'd like to develop it further.

In this example, the characters in Kate's game have slowly but surely exposed the evil baron as a wicked conspirator against the throne. As a result, the king has sent one of his legions to lay siege to the baron's keep, and the heroes are obliged to accompany his troops. This will be an encounter for a generic fantasy setting, and it will be a hybrid of two encounter types – exploration and combat.

#### STEP 1

## BRAINSTORM THE ENCOUNTER

Sieges aren't weekend affairs, as they can last weeks, months, or even years. Assuming the evil baron is well-supplied (he is) and possesses enough defenders to hold the king's troops at bay (he does), it could take quite some time to bring him to heel. Since protracted sieges are fairly tedious, Kate decides she needs to speed things along in a dramatic and exciting way. How best can the heroes bring the conflict to an end?

Brainstorming the idea, Kate writes the following concepts down on a scrap of paper:

secret escape route, dragon, archers  
marsh, chasm, elite guards, carnivorous plants

Looking these concepts over, things start to come together. Perhaps there's a rumor that the evil baron has a secret escape route he can take when things go south. If the heroes can enter the keep via the escape route, they might be able to open the gates and allow the king's troops inside. This sounds good so far, but Kate figures she can milk a few more surprises from our brainstorming list.

Kate decides the escape route exits the keep and leads to a bridge that spans a deep chasm. The bridge is guarded by elite warriors. Since a dragon is probably a little too much for her heroes, she makes the elite warriors members of a draconic race of humanoid mercenaries (including some archers). Each element contributes to the unique nature of the encounter, but she's not done yet. Beyond the bridge is a marsh inhabited by carnivorous plants – the infamous Hungry Swamp!

#### STEP 2

## DEFINE ITS PLACE IN THE STORY

The heroes have been hounding the evil baron for quite some time, and this is their big chance to end his reign of terror. This encounter serves as the prelude to their final confrontation with the baron, which is liable to be an epic encounter all by itself. Still, Kate wants the characters to have a memorable adventure, so this should be a fairly difficult chapter in their overall storyline.

#### STEP 3

## DEFINE THE CONFLICT

There are several conflicts apparent in this encounter. Each conflict must be resolved in order for the adventurers to succeed. Failure at any juncture compromises the entire effort, so the heroes must be on their toes and ready for anything.

Kate's list of conflicts is as follows:

1. The location of the evil baron's escape route is a secret, which means the characters need to find it. This can be accomplished in a number of ways, including direct methods such as interrogating the baron's underlings or more proactive methods like seeking out workers who built the route.
2. The escape route lies at the opposite end of a swamp that's overgrown with carnivorous plants. This requires the heroes to navigate a treacherous piece of terrain while simultaneously dealing with voracious vegetation.
3. Even if the heroes survive the swamp, there are a number of elite draconic guards blocking the bridge that leads to the keep. The guards are well-paid professional mercenaries, so it's unlikely they're going to allow intruders to pass without a struggle.
4. Once inside the keep, the encounter's fourth and final conflict is that the characters must locate and open the gate, allowing the king's armies access.

#### STEP 4

## DETERMINE HOW TO RESOLVE THE CONFLICT

How the players resolve the various conflicts in the encounter is up to them, though Kate plans to give them a hint or two if they seem to be at a loss for ideas. She can provide them with clues or make obvious suggestions, but she decides to start with clues that they can discover.

Kate knows some of her characters have applicable skills. Those who are well-versed in local history or architecture can attempt an Intelligence (Engineering or Historical Lore) ability test to see if they know where the escape route might be located. Others might rely on their wilderness skills such as Perception (Searching or Tracking) to scout the castle's surroundings for clues. There are a multitude of other possibilities that go beyond the scope of this example. Kate sets the difficulty for most of these options at challenging (TN 13) by default so they are achievable but characters don't automatically succeed, though she is willing to raise or lower specific test difficulties as necessary based on her players' ideas.

As a backup plan, Kate also plans to introduce another element to the encounter if necessary to keep things interesting. For example, if the king has previously captured the keep's architect or castellan, the prisoner might reveal the location of the escape route to the players... for a price. Note that this option would add a roleplaying element to the encounter.

In the end, Kate knows her players and is ready and willing to adapt to them as necessary.

#### STEP 5

## DETAIL THE CHALLENGES

Here's where things get messy, but in a good way. Kate needs to detail and design every challenge the players are liable to face, such as the Hungry Swamp and the draconic mercenaries. Let's take a look at two of the conflicts—the Hungry Swamp and the draconic guards—and see how Kate brings them to life during the encounter.

Kate decides she can approach the Hungry Swamp as an area filled with voracious plant creatures, or she can consider it a hazard. Given that the plants are likely to be stationary, it's probably sufficient to consider them as hazards to be overcome. The *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* contains detailed guidelines for designing hazards. To make it interesting, she divides the journey through the swamp into three distinct hazards.

1. Shortly after they enter the swamp, one or more of the characters are threatened by strangling vines that descend from the tops of the marsh's gnarled mangrove trees.
2. As they cross the swamp, the heroes are confronted by a patch of cactus-like plants endowed with poisonous spines.
3. Lastly, the protagonists must wade across a brackish pool covered in lily pads that behave in a manner similar to stinging jellyfish.



Using the rules in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, Kate defines each of the three hazards mechanically and with increasing levels of difficulty, beginning at TN 11 to detect them and mitigate damage and increasing as the way becomes more treacherous. Kate keeps the strengths, abilities, and weaknesses of her players in mind when determining how best to avoid these hazards and how much damage they do, deciding most can be detected with a Perception (Searching) or Intelligence (Natural Lore) test, and each hazard does around 2d6 damage on average. Mitigating damage depends on the hazard, though Kate envisions Dexterity (Acrobatics) as being useful in all cases, with other abilities and focuses applying on a case-by-case basis. These hazards provide a definite threat but are unlikely to kill or disable any characters outright.

Determining the abilities of the draconic guards is an entirely different process. Kate could create them from scratch, but she decides to adapt an existing adversary to save time. Paging through CHAPTER 9 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, she finds that the soldier demon entry, with its Moderate Threat level, is pretty close to the challenge Kate wants. However, these guards are dragons, not demons, so she'll need to make some tweaks to bring them in line with her concept.

While the soldier demon is pretty good right off the bat, Kate wants to civilize it a bit. She does this by removing its natural bite and claw attacks and equipping it with standard arms and armor. Next, she swaps out its Accuracy (Bite) and Fighting (Claws) ability focuses and replaces them with Accuracy (Bows) and Fighting (Heavy Blades). She also replaces the soldier demon's Dual Strike favored stunt with Set Up, and she reduces the effectiveness of its Armored Hide from a rating of 5 to 3. Last of all, she removes its Tooth & Claw special quality and replaces it with a Magic Resistance special power to reflect its lineage.

The rest of the challenges—such as locks and traps protecting the escape route, the keep's defenders, and other hazards—are designed in much the same way, with target numbers and statistics chosen to be entertaining and challenging but not overwhelmingly difficult.

## STEP 6

### SET THE SCENE

Each phase of the encounter, from the swamp to the bridge to the escape route and the baron's keep, requires a basic description. Kate only needs a few lines for each—just enough information to establish the location's setting and mood. As an example, we'll look at the brief description of the Hungry Swamp when the heroes enter it for the first time.

Kate wants the swamp to feel dangerous. She also wants the players to have some idea of the swamp's oppressive atmosphere and the omnipresent smell of rotting vegetation and stagnant water. Of course, she also wants them on their toes in preparation for the hazards they will soon face. She comes up with the following flavor text, which should be enough to put their imaginations in the right place:

"The light grows dim as you duck beneath the gnarled canopy of the Hungry Swamp. Blood-sucking flies buzz around your

ears and your nose is assaulted by the stink of decay and brackish water. In the distance you hear a splash, as if something is moving just beyond the extent of your vision."

Of course, Kate may add to or embellish this text as the game progresses. The flavor text is meant as a guide, and she might not read it word-for-word once play starts. In fact, she underlines some key words and phrases in her text sample in case she decides to improvise during the session. She then describes the rest of the encounter's elements and challenges using the same process.

## STEP 7

### DRAW A MAP

There are two parts of this encounter where Kate decides it's helpful to have a map handy. The first is the bridge that spans the chasm, since the characters are likely to have a fight with the guards there. The second place is the keep itself, if only to be sure she has some idea of which way the heroes must go in order to open the main gate. She sketches out some simple but effective maps of these two areas, deciding she can improvise the rest. She might even give one of these maps to the PCs if they come up with a creative way to scout out or analyze the area, but in any event they will be helpful for her and the players during the encounter.

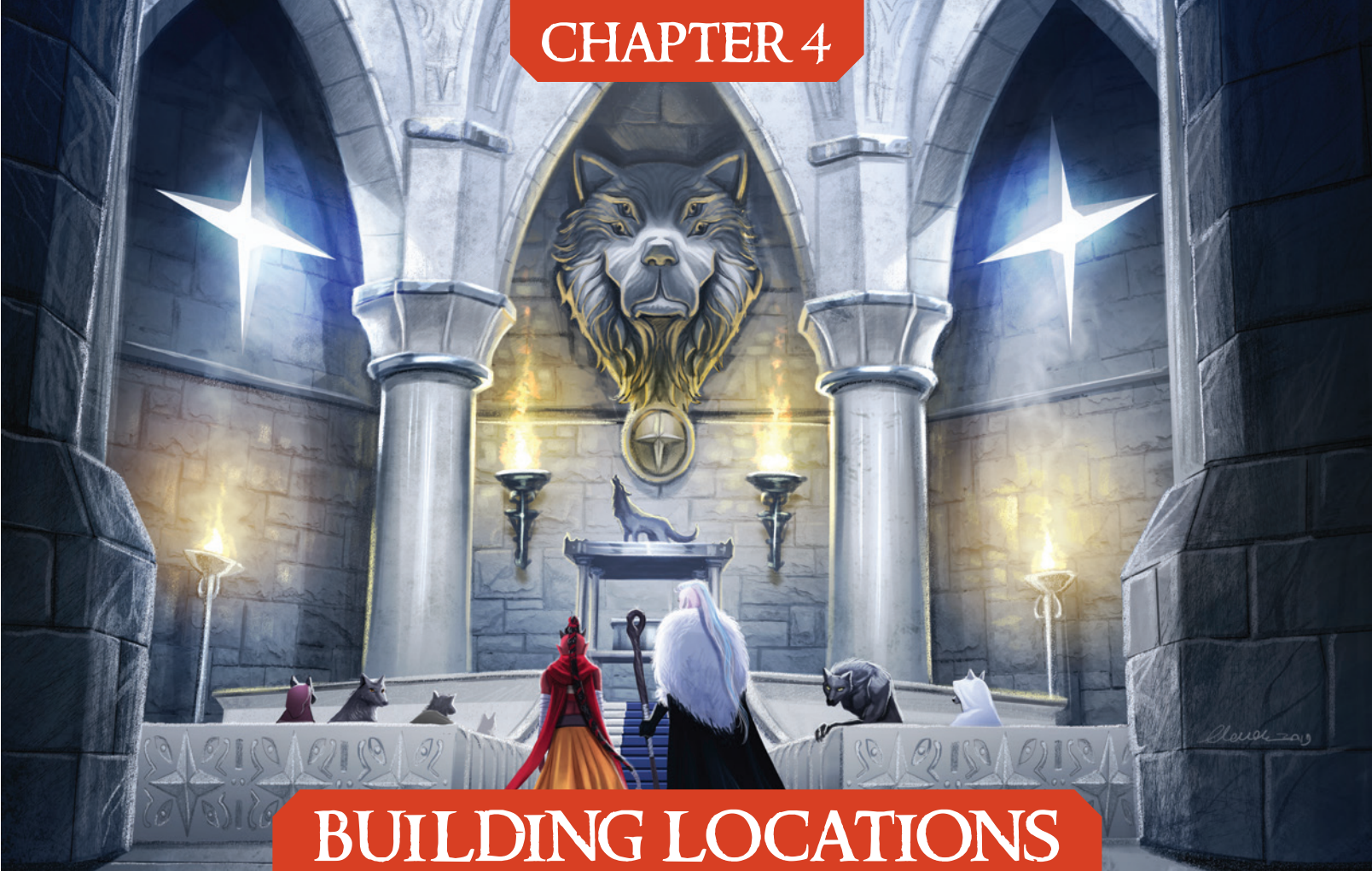
## STEP 8

### DETERMINE THE REWARDS

Given the fact that this encounter has so many different elements—which are almost different encounters in themselves—it's bound to be fairly challenging. Using the suggested experience point rewards in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, Kate decides this encounter's base difficulty is Hard and plans to award experience points accordingly. As the game progresses, Kate also decides she will provide bonus XP awards depending on how the characters resolve the various conflicts they face, granting more for exceptionally creative or effective solutions.

In addition, Kate wants to reward the heroes with some loot, such as weapons, armor, and other useful items taken from the baron's draconic guards. She'll also give them the opportunity to locate some incidental treasure—coins and the like—in the Hungry Swamp, taken from the body of a plant's victim. This encounter isn't about raiding tombs or looting bodies, but a little material reward will help motivate the more wealth-oriented characters.

Ultimately though, Kate figures the bulk of the rewards will come from the king and his troops as a reward for ending the siege so quickly. Countless lives have been saved due to their actions, though the king might be more concerned with the financial savings of avoiding a protracted conflict. He will give the heroes a monetary reward for sure, and Kate decides he is also willing to award honorifics and perhaps even a title within the kingdom to characters who show great heroism or otherwise distinguish themselves.



## BUILDING LOCATIONS

One of the draws of fantasy role-playing games is the chance to explore new worlds and strange places. Rather than adventuring among familiar places and sites, players can imagine strange, exotic locations that we couldn't find anywhere on our own world and explore territory that literally no one has ever seen before them.

A new location is a place for characters to explore. Exploration can take a few different forms, however, depending on the type of location. It may involve investigating every alleyway and hidey-hole, getting involved with all the factions and important NPCs, or it may be entering an area no one has seen before simply to find out what is there. It can mean trying to figure out the history of a location, determining what happened years or generations ago, or simply enjoying the atmosphere of a new city. Any of these is a worthy exploration of a place, and each requires different information.

But that is not the only way you can use a location in a game.

### FAMILIAR LOCATIONS

Sometimes, a familiar place is exactly what is called for—a comforting place (a favorite tavern, a safe camp in the woods, a halfling's comfortable hole) can be a contrast to the dangerous, strange, wondrous world the heroes adventure through. A place like this gives the characters somewhere safe to return to and a reminder of what they fight for.

### MOOD PIECES

Locations can help establish and reinforce the tone and themes of an adventure or even an entire campaign. A lonely, crumbling tower on an empty hillside is a location for a tense, scary, or melancholy story, while a bustling city is a site for chaos and intrigue. You can go even further with using a place to establish tone—imagine a story about the hubris of a wizard trying to claim immortality set in the crumbling fortress of a lost and forgotten empire. Each fallen statue and broken archway proclaims the folly of his quest, but he ignores these warnings.

### RECURRING LOCATIONS

Places have many different uses within a game. A location can be a reoccurring “set” characters grow familiar with, comforting and full of friends. Or it could be a new place to explore, mysterious and exciting. A location can simply be a place to have a fun and unusual fight. Some of these important locations can become like characters, as the heroes return to them repeatedly.

You can use these reoccurring locations to telegraph problems or new adventures. When the players have become accustomed to a place, they can become sensitive to even small changes—you can hint at something being wrong simply by changing your description slightly. A different scent in the air, a few things out of place, a new shop at the end of the street—any of these can be the call to a new adventure.

## MYSTERIOUS PLACES

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Another good rule of thumb is to always create a secret attached to any location you create for your game. These secrets do not have to be world-shattering, but by establishing even a simple secret within your new location, you ensure you'll always have more things for the heroes to investigate and discover.

## CREATING LOCATIONS

While creating a location for your campaign can be as simple as jotting down a few notes or scribbling a map, sometimes you want a more detailed plan for an important setting in your campaign. The following process covers the different things you'll need to consider to make an interesting, lively new place for your players to explore.

### STEP 1

## CONCEPT

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The first step when creating a location is to come up with a concept, a basic statement of what the location is: an abandoned ruin, a city built over the top of a hundred previous cities, a totalitarian fortress made from the skull of a giant. Usually you'll already have a concept in mind. Very few people start thinking "I need to create a location" with no idea of what the location will be.

Whether you are starting from scratch or already have the start of an idea, it can be useful to spend some time brainstorming. In particular, consider your objective. Why are you including this location in your game? Is it going to be a potential home base for the characters? A town full of groups working at agendas the heroes might oppose, allowing for intrigue? A dangerous unknown, ripe for adventurers to explore and map? Determining what the location brings to your game will help you focus on the most appropriate elements while you create the details of your new setting.

The objective of including a location is related to the types of challenges and encounters the characters are likely to encounter there. In *Fantasy AGE*, these usually fall into the three categories of combat, exploration, and social encounters. While you do not need to limit yourself to one specific category of challenge, having an idea of what sort of scenes will be your main focus will help you as you continue creating the location for your game. Many common types of locations in fantasy games are also strongly associated with one of these categories. Ruins, for example, are usually used for exploration or combat encounters, while towns and cities tend to focus more heavily on social challenges. A settled barony will tend to have lots of opportunities for interaction with NPCs, while a trackless woodland is all about braving the elements and finding your way. However, don't be afraid to mix these up! Finding a social encounter in the middle of nowhere can be particularly memorable, as can a fight within the heavily policed halls of a noble's manor.

When brainstorming, take the time to explore unusual and even silly ideas. One of the advantages of taking the time to prepare a location beforehand rather than improvising at the table is you can expand on ideas that, in the moment, you might dismiss. For example, it might seem silly to take the

time to detail a perfumer's shop in your setting, but it could be the perfect place to find out rumors and information about wealthy locals, and the owner could easily find work for adventurers willing to brave dangerous areas to get them rare ingredients for their creations.

Once you have a concept in place, you can expand on various details of the location. The remaining steps of the location creation process can take place in any order, and they often influence each other. A location dealing with social interactions will require more time spent thinking about the inhabitants and how they relate to each other, while a location for a fight needs more consideration of the physical space. However, taking time to think about each of these steps will make your locations more real and alive, no matter which details you focus on.

If you find yourself stuck or uncertain where to go with an idea, ask yourself a fresh question, coming at it from a different angle. Maybe you know who the original inhabitants of a location were but are uncertain about part of the history. Simply move on to another step in the creation process, such as the current inhabitants, and use the ideas you come up with there to spark new questions when you return to the history of the site.

### STEP 2

## HISTORY

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One of the first things to consider is the history of the place you are creating. Having an established background allows you to more easily envision the architecture and style of the place. This gives you more details to work with and can give more life to the location in the minds of your players.

The purpose of the location is one important consideration when creating the location's history. Was the site constructed, or is it a natural area? What did the original builders and inhabitants use it for? Are those original inhabitants still using the site, or has someone else taken over? When and why did the location change hands? Was the fortress conquered? Did some sort of natural disaster ruin the town? Is the forest blighted by the presence of a monster, twisting nature out of balance? Answering each of these questions gives you a better sense of the place.

Some places will obviously have longer histories than others. For example, new cities are often built on the ruins of old cities — mostly because there are good reasons (such as a river or natural harbor for easy trade) for a city to be built there in the first place. Ruins also benefit from a focus on their history, giving a context to your design of the location. Discovering the history of a site can also help the characters in the game by giving hints to things like secret passages, passwords, riddles, or even just an idea of where an object they are looking for might be hidden. Even if your location is a new building, it can be fun to establish what was there before and give small hints and bits of information. This can easily tie in to any secrets you create for the location, such as the sub-basement of a building containing a relic from an ancient temple or a stone carved with a legendary story — a story hinting at the resting place of a long-dead adventurer.

Finally, you'll want to bring your history up to the modern day, with an idea of how the location came to be in its current state. This ties in to both the inhabitants of the site (Step 3), and the overall current situation at the site (Step 4).

## INHABITANTS

The next thing to consider for your location is the people there. Is the location currently inhabited? (If not, then this will be a pretty short step, and you'll need some other compelling things going on.) Is the location used for something, even if it is not strictly inhabited? How do the people at this location relate to each other? Establishing these details sets up the situation the characters are wandering into—a status quo they can interact with and upset by their presence.

### INHABITANTS

What type of society or group inhabits the location? When creating something like a region or a kingdom, or even a city, you might think about the common demographics for the region—are they mostly farmers, or nomadic herders? Are there important groups that are not part of this majority? Are there multiple tribes or groups all living within this region? For an individual location, consider the types of individuals the location will need. A shipyard needs overseers and various workers; a shrine needs priests and caretakers; and a market needs vendors, guardsmen, and thieves.

How are these groups organized or governed? “Who is in charge?” is one of the most basic questions that crops up whenever you get a group of people together. For a region or a city, you'll need to at least briefly consider the official government. Is the region controlled by a hereditary baron? Is the city run by a council of the richest merchants in the region? For smaller areas, a specific person is probably in charge—a roadside guesthouse has an innkeeper or owner, while a monastery has its abbess.

### IMPORTANT CHARACTERS & CONFLICTS

Once you have established the groups at a site and how they are organized, you are well on your way to figuring out the important NPCs. People representing the government, the groups in charge, or simply the important roles you've established earlier will make up the majority of the important non-player characters at a site. You don't need to develop an intricate history or stats for them now (though you can if you want to—see **CHAPTER 5: BUILDING CHARACTERS** for more information); just a sentence or two about who they are and why they are important will suffice. This brief description should include things like the role they play at the location and the source of any authority they have—which can be anything from being the head of the official government to knowing everyone's secrets to simply being the one barmaid everyone likes and listens to.

Once you have the important characters for your location, consider the potential conflicts between them. You'll need to determine which characters the conflict is between, and what the nature of the conflict is. Conflicts generally spring from the goals of the characters in question. What do they want, and why? How do these desires conflict with other characters at the location? How are they pursuing this conflict? By creating these conflicts, you establish an interesting situation for the heroes to interact with when they enter the scene.

While this chapter breaks down the process of creating locations into discrete steps and delves deeply into each step, it is important to remember you don't always have to get as detailed when creating your own locations. Some locations will not require an in-depth history or much exploration of the social connections between the people who live there. A location appearing briefly in a session may require nothing more than a concept and a brief statement of the current situation there.

When creating locations (or, really, anything for your game) there's no need to create more than what you need for the next session. You can create more if you are enjoying the process of creating details—but keep in mind, it may never actually see use at the table. Once you have what you actually need for your next game, don't force yourself to keep creating details if you're not having fun—you'll just end up burned out and exhausted before you even get to the game.

### DETAILS

Finally, consider any other details specific to the inhabitants and the social situation. Are there other, less important NPCs at the site—perhaps allies or pawns in the conflicts you've created? How do people at the location react to strangers such as adventurers? Are there any particular quirks or unusual customs at this location? Perhaps it is considered rude to not stop and greet anyone you meet at a specific shrine, or there might be certain festival days when a roadhouse is more crowded than normal. One or two details like this can make a site seem more alive at the table. Even something simple, like an inn being famous for its fruit pies, can make a relatively unimportant location memorable to the players.

## CURRENT SITUATION

All the previous steps, put together, make up the current situation at the location. Take a moment to think about whether you have addressed some basic questions about the location. What is the history of the location (and is it important to what is currently going on)? Who are the current owners and occupants of the location? How are the current occupants organized, and are there any conflicts among them?

Once you have established those details, consider a few other facets of the current situation of your location. Have there been any recent events of note or relevant external conflicts? These will generally tie into your objective for including this location in your game. A simple stop along the road will not have much in the way of “hooks” for the characters to explore, while a location meant to be a hub where they will spend much of their time should have numerous secrets and conflicts for them to be involved in.

Finally, you should consider any services the heroes may need at this location. This can include things like a place to sleep and markets for buying and selling gear, but also things like manufacturers of specialty goods (weapons or unusual

items), access to spellcasting, or access to information. Again, this is more likely to be important in places the heroes expect to return to multiple times.

## STEP 5

### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

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The final step of creating your location is developing the description of the actual physical layout and environment. Each of the previous steps can affect the description and layout of the place. The history of a modern city has grown out of an ancient fortress. The current inhabitants may have let the site fall into disrepair. The site's original purpose and how the current inhabitants use it will both change how you describe the location.

This sort of description doesn't have to involve carefully detailing everything room by room. You may be creating a large location, such as a city, for the characters to explore, but the exploration may cover large amounts of area without much time at the table. As always, making sure the game remains fun and interesting for everyone is the most important factor.

Another consideration when creating a new location is its placement. Like the initial concept, you will often have a basic idea of placement from the very start of your creation process. In some cases, however, you may have an idea for a building or other site but not be certain where to put it. Again, it is useful to consider the purpose of the location, both within the setting and in your campaign, when determining placement.

Placing a location based on its purpose in the setting is important for making the place feel real to the players. A city is likely to be on a river, coast, or some other trade route. Places like inns are on well-traveled roads, while ruins or monster lairs are likely to be isolated from civilization. However, you can play with expectations by changing this. Why is the manor in the center of town still ruined after all these years? Surely someone would have tried to rebuild it. And if the heroes come across a large, well-appointed inn in the middle of nowhere, they should probably be suspicious.

Equally important is how the placement of a location affects your game. Do the characters need to travel deep into the wilderness to find the fortress of their enemies, forcing them to work without supplies or help? Or is the fortress in the heart of a massive city, giving the heroes the opportunity to find other factions to ally with against their foes?

When determining placement, it's common for one location to end up within another. A magical laboratory is within a city, which is within a barony carved out by the current baron's grandfather. Depending on your needs, you might start with a wider picture, which then narrows as the characters interact with your setting, or you may start with a small location and expand as the characters explore more. In either case, keep the connections between a location and its surroundings in mind. Each location will be colored by the wider area it exists in, and you will want to be sure, no matter the order you created them in, they could plausibly exist together. Also keep in mind the NPCs and secrets you've already created for these locations, as they could tie into each other. An NPC in a smaller location may be part of a group working across a larger area, and the secrets tied to one shop in a small town could connect with plots throughout the entire region.

Finally, you'll want to consider any mechanics you need to tie to your location. This is particularly important for locations where combat is expected, but it is worth considering for any location you create. And, given the sorts of things players do, you never know where a fight might break out!

Size and scale are important to consider, both in terms of realism and to match the sorts of abilities the player characters have and the pacing you want to establish. If you are creating a ruin for the adventurers to explore, you'll need to keep in mind things like how quickly they'll be able to move through the area and whether they have some form of alternative movement (flying mounts, for example)—things which change how they will approach a problem. When establishing a location for a fight, you'll need to make sure there is enough space to allow for some maneuvering, unless you intend the location to be particularly cramped and constrained!

After you've established the scale of the location, consider any hazards the characters might run into while exploring, fighting, or simply interacting with the location. A wilderness location might have natural hazards, such as rock falls, floods, or extreme temperatures. A fortress or a monster's lair may have traps or alarms. Even within a relatively safe, "civilized" area, it's worth considering hazards such as traffic or runaway animals, fire, and similar threats. When creating hazards, you should also think about combat considerations such as cover, separate areas within the location, and how characters can navigate through the location.

When creating a location specifically for a fight, pay more attention to mechanical considerations such as hazards and cover. It's particularly important to consider how the fight can move through the location and how characters can avoid hazards or take advantage of cover and terrain. Having an interesting location, and giving characters incentive to interact with the terrain, can more concretely anchor the fight, avoiding the effect where characters simply trade blows without moving. Even when creating a seemingly "minor" encounter (like an ambush by a group of thugs), an interesting location can ensure the fight stays memorable and fun.

### TO MAP OR NOT TO MAP

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A common question when creating a location for a game, particularly when creating a set for a fight, is whether to create a map for the location. While a great deal of this comes down to the preferences of the players (including the GM), there are many reasons both to use maps and to avoid mapping.

Having a map is useful for establishing a shared sense of the location. Everyone can see the layout, they can get a better sense of exactly where they are in relation to everything else in the scene, and everyone will generally have a better sense of what is and is not in the scene. Having a visual representation helps many players develop a better sense of place, allowing them to more easily imagine where their characters are—which can translate into them having an easier time interacting with the architecture of the scene.

Many players find having a map particularly useful in combat, allowing them to clearly see where allies and enemies are positioned, who has cover, and what exists in the location

that they can use in interesting ways to gain an advantage in the fight. Some players have difficulty envisioning a location without a map or some other form of representation, which can lead to the feeling a fight is taking place in a sort of vague, empty room. For many people, this leads to a tendency for fights to turn into just standing in place trading blows with an opponent, with no sense of movement or interaction with the location. Without a map, it can be difficult to determine the locations of characters in the fight, which can lead to a sense that the decision of who can target whom is completely arbitrary, or it can even lead to disagreements. Many groups, even if they never use maps for anything else, will pull out a map for a fight scene for exactly these reasons.

There are some downsides to mapping out a scene, however. Much like the difference between watching a movie and reading a book, having a visual representation of a location means people aren't really able to create their own picture of the scene. Also, once everyone has seen the map, it can be harder to improvise or adjust the description of the scene, which can hamper the creativity of some players. If the action of a scene moves beyond the confines of the map (a fight moving up a staircase into another room, for example, or a confrontation turning into a chase), it can be difficult to adjust the scene to match the new location. Going without a map, even in a fight scene, can lend itself to a more cinematic, faster, and more free-form style, with the location changing along with the action in whatever way makes the most sense, rather than being locked to the map.

## LOCATION STUNTS & MECHANICS

One way you can use *Fantasy AGE* to make locations unique is to create new stunts that allow characters to exploit, utilize, or otherwise interact with the location to their benefit. Some of these interactions are already covered with existing stunts, but there are times a GM may wish to create a stunt when preparing the location or even on the fly.

Location stunts come in two varieties: altered versions of existing stunts and new stunt effects. An icy cavern might make it easier to push characters off balance and knock them prone, as footing is slippery and treacherous. Simulating this is as easy as declaring that in this location, the Knock Prone stunt costs 1 SP less (or is resisted at a penalty, when applicable) and Skirmish moves the target an additional yard for each point spent. A muck-filled mire might have the opposite effect, making those same stunts harder to use while at the location.

By contrast, some locations might require totally unique stunts. For example, a dangerously unstable building might partially collapse on a character, doing damage or imposing penalties. This isn't directly covered under any existing stunts, but it could be a special stunt effect for the location, allowing a character who strikes a foe or otherwise performs exceptionally to "bring

down the house" on their foes. Location stunts should correspond roughly to existing stunts for cost, though they may be somewhat cheaper than normal if they require particular actions or even existing stunts to function. Thus a stunt that does damage to a target should have roughly the same cost as Mighty or Lethal Blow, but if it allows the target's Armor Rating to be applied separately or can be used only against a target that is also Set Up or Knocked Prone or subjected to another stunt effect, it should cost fewer SP.

Locations might also provide circumstantial bonuses to tests and other mechanical effects beyond stunts. A crowded marketplace makes picking someone's pocket or following them without being noticed easier, but it also helps someone give pursuers the slip if they know they are being followed. A well-stocked library makes most Intelligence (Research) tests easier. These situations usually add 1 or 2 to the result of a test, though GMs can get more creative if they desire, adding 1 or 2 stunt points for rolling doubles or generating other effects that suggest certain tasks are easier or more appropriate in a location. Penalties can also be applied if appropriate; it's hard to stitch up your comrade's





wounds or brew potions on a ship in the middle of a storm, for example. Circumstantial bonuses can be replaced with lower Target Numbers if GMs and players are more comfortable with that option.

Creating location-based stunts and effects are more advanced Game Mastering techniques. A GM should be comfortable with running *Fantasy AGE*, applying circumstantial effects to their games, and crafting encounters and locations before easing into this aspect of creating locations. The upcoming *Fantasy AGE* book, *Lairs*, will discuss location-based stunts in more detail.

#### EXAMPLE LOCATION

## EPIRIA, PAST & PRESENT

### STEP 1

#### CONCEPT

The characters in Greg's game are traveling by ship to a new region, and he needs to create the locations they'll explore when they arrive in a few sessions. He starts by thinking of a concept for the area. When creating a whole region, he wants to work in broad terms. The area should be relatively small, but with plenty of room for adventures. He wants the new region to have some of the same organizations as the previous region but to still have a very different feel. Because of this, he decides on a peninsula which has recently come under the control of Ras (a noble title, equivalent to a baron) Teru Belete. This allows for an interesting blend of both the original inhabitants and the newcomers.

### STEP 2

#### HISTORY

With the initial concept worked out, Greg starts thinking about the history of the region. As he wants potential for several ruins, he decides that a few hundred years ago, the region (which he names Epiria) was an outpost for a larger kingdom of people known as the Tazoti. However, the local people eventually rose up in rebellion and threw the Tazoti occupiers out. Over time, they established their own city-states, some of them over the ruins of the previous kingdom's construction. Greg also decides on a secret related to that history – when the Tazoti took over the region, they ousted the previous overlords, a kingdom of ettercops (see **CHAPTER 7: BUILDING MONSTERS & ADVERSARIES**). The rituals and magical architecture of the Tazoti keep the ettercops sealed outside this world, and they have been almost completely forgotten.

Two generations ago, one of those city-states attempted to bring the entire region under its control, which started a war across the whole region. As the war continued and alliances shifted, the city of Caranth was forced to look farther afield to find allies. Eventually, the prince of Caranth made a marriage of alliance with a member of the Belete family, bringing that family's money and troops into the fray. With the outside help, Caranth was victorious, taking control of the majority of the peninsula.

However, six years ago, a strange illness swept through the city of Caranth. The ruling family of the city all succumbed to

the disease. This left Ras Teru Belete the next living heir. She has recently traveled to the region and begun consolidating power for her family.

### STEP 3

#### INHABITANTS

In Greg's campaign, the various fantasy races tend to live together, with cultural differences, rather than race, being the main divider. Greg imagines two main groups in the region, in addition to the monsters adventurers are likely to encounter. These two groups are the native Epirians and the Tigrinyan people, recently come to the region with Teru Belete. These latter have brought representatives of the secret magical societies from their homeland (a source of contacts and enemies for the heroes, which Greg does not want to ignore). The locals are mostly represented by the remaining members of the ruling class from the cities.

With these groups established, Greg needs to develop important characters to represent those groups. He also wants to establish secrets related to these characters. Ras Teru Belete is the obvious place to start. Though the closest living relative to the previous ruling family of the city of Caranth, she is an outsider here. She is trying to rebuild the region after it has been devastated by wars and plague, and she does genuinely care about the well-being of the people of Epiria. However, her methods and customs are strange to them. In addition to her inherited authority, she has more money and resources (from the Belete family) than any other power-player in the region. This is because her family has secret plans for the region – they are attempting to unearth the magic used by the Tazoti, which has long been lost.

For the Epirians, Greg creates Leiandroia Athanas, a former advisor to the last prince of Caranth. As a descendant of the last monarch of the city of Chalcis, she has an impeccable bloodline, carrying a great deal of weight with the other families in the region. However, since Teru has set up her court in Caranth, Leiandroia has felt more and more pushed aside, her advice ignored. She has her own secret: She contracted the plague which swept through Caranth, but she recovered, and she is the only person she knows of who did. She is uncertain why.

Finally, to keep this from being a simple two-way conflict (and to bring in the magical societies), Greg creates a third NPC. Meles is a war leader and advisor to Ras Teru Belete, who came with her when she took control of the region. He is a war mage and a member of one of the magical secret societies, sent to help Teru find the secrets of the Tazoti magic. However, he finds himself developing a great deal of respect for the Epirians and begins to lean their way in disputes.

### STEP 4

#### CURRENT SITUATION

The main conflict in the region is between Teru Belete and her strange customs (and secret agenda), and Leiandroia Athanas' feeling ignored and her people overlooked, with Meles a spoiler able to benefit either party. Greg wants to make sure the conflict has an immediate focus, however. He decides the ras has started a project to repair and rebuild



some of the trade roads and has demanded some taxes be paid in hours of labor rather than coin. However, the Epirians, having long ago been slaves of the Tazoti, view any sort of unpaid labor as slavery, which they abhor. Unless Teru listens to Leiandroia, or someone else can explain the issue to her, this could boil over into violence.

#### STEP 5

### PHYSICAL DESCRIPTION

While individual cities and ruins within the region will see more detailed descriptions, Greg still wants to come up with a few basic touchstones, probably also sketching a rough map of the region. The peninsula is fairly small, taking only a week or so to ride across given a good road. It's a bit longer, of course, taking maybe a month to ride down the length of it. It is in a warm, subtropical region, with most of the cities along a rocky coastline. There are hills inland from the coast, which is where farming and the like takes place, while the center of the peninsula is rough ground made of forested mountains (with the forest turning almost to jungle in the south). In terms of the style of architecture for the region, Greg decides the Tazoti ruins have a Mesoamerican or Aztec feel to them, though many of the buildings are made of dark marble rather than rougher stone. The Epirian style is more akin to Greek architecture.

### ZOOMING IN

Having established facts for the region as a whole, Greg now wants to zoom in a bit and focus on the capital city of Caranth,

which is the port through which the characters will enter the region. While he knows many of the answers to the location creation steps will come from the ideas he came up with for the Epirian Peninsula as a whole, he wants to make sure he hasn't missed anything, so he starts at the beginning.

Greg already knows the concept for the city—it is the capital city of the Epirian peninsula, now under the rule of a foreigner. The city should act as a home base for the heroes, with some intrigue and adventure within the city walls, as well as safe places to stay, get supplies, and find patrons in need of help from daring adventurers.

Greg now turns to the history of the city. There are several things he already knows—for one, many of the cities of the region were built on the ruins of Tazoti cities. Also, the city of Caranth was involved in the wars that disrupted the region, until the prince of Caranth made an alliance with the Belete family. Finally, he knows a deadly plague swept through the city six years ago.

With this in mind, Greg sketches out the history of the city. He decides to add another layer to the city's history, which is a secret almost no one knows. The site was originally the location of an ettercop city, destroyed when the Tazoti conquered the region. The ruins of the ettercops' construction remain, far below the streets of the modern city.

Following the ettercops' defeat, the Tazoti city of Cuscatlán was built on the site. In turn, the Tazoti city was overthrown by the Epirians, who built their own structures, founding the city of Caranth. There are still elements of Tazoti architecture in the city, some of them buried. When the Epirian cities began fighting among themselves, Caranth built a wall around most

of the city to defend itself. Most recently, the plague swept through the city, killing roughly 8% of the population and leaving some areas within the city walls partially deserted. Greg decides to tie in this plague with the ettercop ruins beneath the city: Someone opened a ruin they shouldn't have, and the illness spread from there – possibly the result of some sort of magical curse, though Greg's not yet sure.

The inhabitants Greg developed for the region live within the city of Caranth. Ras Belete, Leiandroia, and Meles all make their home here, and they are the main forces of government in the city. Greg makes a note of secret societies in the city, their contacts hiring thieves and adventurers to delve into the Tazoti ruins in remote parts of the city. This means there are also groups exploring the ruins – possibly rivals, less scrupulous than the characters! Finally, thinking about some additional details about life in the city, he decides that in addition to the usual markets open in the city most days, there is a grand market day on the last day of every month. Most inhabitants of the city who are not themselves selling things at the market take the day off. However, despite the available space, these markets never spill over into the northeast side of the city, where the plague left whole neighborhoods uninhabited.

The current situation is mostly covered by the information on the region as a whole: There is tension between the Epirians and the Tigrinyans over the requested labor to rebuild the roads in place of taxes. In addition, the ruins beneath Caranth are an excellent source of possible adventures.

Then Greg gets into the physical description of the city. The city has a population of roughly 30,000 people, though it has room for almost another 1,200 people within its walls. Most of the population is clustered in the west and southwest, near the harbor, with the southeast quarter being more sparsely populated and the northeast almost completely deserted. The city is full of open squares, shared wells and fountains, and a few public gardens or parks. Most of the buildings are made of brightly painted stone, with outdoor galleries and roofs held up by strong columns. Sculpture is a common decoration, with statues of spirits and local heroes in many of the public spaces. Here and there, the remains of older buildings yet stand, with reliefs carved onto the surface of the stone by the Tazoti.

After a few sessions in the new region, Greg finds that he needs to add a black market, where the characters can connect with criminals and purchase some less-than-legal supplies. He decides to make it a literal market: a place where criminals have set up stalls and customers can browse. This, then, is his concept – an illegal market within the city.

Greg wants to focus primarily on the physical location, so he starts at the physical description step rather than the site's history. The market needs to be hard to find, or the authorities would shut it down, thus it makes sense to put the market beneath the city, in some of the Tazoti ruins. The area needs to be big enough to support the large number of vendors and merchants he imagines, so he ends up placing the market inside the remains of a ball court. The stone "bleachers" are places where some sellers lay out their wares, while the most prestigious spots are on the court itself, where semipermanent stalls can be set up.

Establishing the site as a former ball court leads Greg to consider its history. He decides the ball court was once used as part of a Tazoti ritual, and blood spilled in the court was

used to power the ritual. The market has only been operating for about a year and a half, however, and the market's leadership has banned violence within the market, so they have not yet discovered this aspect of their location.

If a fight does take place in the market, any blood spilled on the ball court causes the remnants of the old magic to go haywire. Anyone within the market takes 1d6 damage every round and suffers from wracking pain which increases the difficulty of all tests by 2 until they can escape the area, clean up the blood, or disrupt the magic. In addition, though the area is fairly large, the variety of booths, vendors with wares laid out on blankets, and people moving through the market looking for things they just can't buy elsewhere makes the place chaotic and cramped. This would hamper any fights or chases taking place in the market.

Thinking about the setup of the market, Greg decides he needs someone to run the place and someone to enforce the rules. Marinos and Silas are cousins, working together to run the market. Marinos is in charge, having originally discovered the ball court. Silas is his enforcer, intimidating the vendors, customers, and any other visitors into following the rules. However, Silas is often distracted by trying to find out more information about the carvings on the Tazoti ruins, and he is starting to think holding the market here is a bad idea.

As a final addition to the inhabitants of the market, Greg decides to include a connection to the secrets he's already created about the plague. Eleni is a thief and tomb robber who dug into the ettercop ruins beneath the city, unleashing the plague. She doesn't know why she wasn't infected, but she's frightened someone will find out her secret. Eleni regularly fences her ill-gotten goods at the market and occasionally dares to lift the odd purse or valuable from an easy mark, making it likely that unscrupulous or obviously wealthy characters draw her attention, giving them a contact who can provide them with tantalizing information about the plague.

## LOCATION STUNTS & MECHANICS

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In addition to the enchantments on the ancient ball court, Greg sees the market in particular as a place bustling with people. While few wish to risk expulsion from the market, some few daring urchins and pickpockets ply their trade there, especially since they are protected from immediate violent reprisal by the market's ban on violence. Greg decides that characters seeking to engage in underhanded actions such as lifting a fellow market-goer's purse or following them through a crowd without being noticed gain a +2 bonus to all appropriate tests. Of course, these bonuses also work to benefit NPCs who seek to pickpocket or tail the PCs for their own ends.

Greg also figures that a keen-minded mage could draw upon the enchantments on the ancient ball court and similar wards throughout the city to cause serious damage to a target, but that the ancient spells also channel small amounts of harmful energies through the caster. To represent this, he states that within the city limits, all stunts that increase magical damage, such as *Mighty Spell*, cost 1 SP less. However, using these stunts inflicts 1 penetrating damage on the caster for every SP spent. Greg notes local spellcasters generally avoid such effects unless desperate.

# BUSINESSES

Everyone needs to make a living. These tables help you construct the details of a shop or traveling merchant. As always, not every result makes sense for every situation. If the party meets a tradesman on the road and you roll “Inn,” you probably want to re-roll.

After determining the type of business, add more flair to this enterprise by rolling on the **Business Details** table a number of times equal to the stunt die result. These rolls on the **Business Details** table are in addition to any rolls indicated by the specific business. Additionally, for any business selling physical goods, roll once on the **Craftsmanship** table on page 79 to determine the average quality of goods available and then on the **Cost** table to determine pricing.

In most cases, businesses dealing in crafted goods and other resources can perform custom work requiring additional time and money. For example, a jeweler doesn't only sell rings and necklaces, but can also make them or can commission a craftsman they regularly work with to do so. Most stores, especially general stores in smaller towns, can acquire more than they regularly carry provided someone is willing to pay and wait as the goods are acquired.

There's no need to get out a calculator for these adjustments. Just do your best estimate and use that as a starting point for negotiations. Assume most traders who also buy goods are willing to pay about 25% of the list price if the PCs have items they want to unload, or more if the items are rare or especially valuable. Some shops may also take commissions, selling on behalf of another in exchange for a percentage of the final sale. This can be very lucrative for characters seeking to unload valuable loot, but they need to either wait around until a sale is made or return to the shop later to claim their profits.

COST			
3D6	COST COMPARED TO LIST PRICE	3D6	COST COMPARED TO LIST PRICE
3	50%	12	110%
4	60%	13	125%
5	65%	14	150%
6	70%	15	200%
7	75%	16	300%
8	80%	17	350%
9	90%	18	400%
10-11	100%		

BUSINESSES	
3D6	RESULT
3-4	<b>SOUVENIR SHOP:</b> Sells largely useless memorabilia for the local region or event.
5	<b>TRADER:</b> Carries everything from the Trade Goods and Raw Materials table in the <b>Equipment</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
6	<b>JEWELER:</b> Carries various types of necklaces, bracelets, rings, earrings, and other adornments.
7	<b>TAILOR:</b> Carries everything from the Clothes and Fashion table in the <b>Equipment</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
8	<b>INN:</b> Roll once on the <b>Inns</b> table to add specific details.
9	<b>ARMORSMITH:</b> Roll once each on the <b>Armor</b> and <b>Shields</b> tables on page 78. They carry the resulting type and all types listed for lower results. Reroll if you get “none” for both.
10	<b>TAVERN:</b> Roll on the <b>Taverns</b> table to add specific details.
11	<b>GENERAL STORE:</b> Carries everything from the Traveling and Adventuring, Home and Hearth, Carrying and Storage, and Tools tables in the <b>Equipment</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
12	<b>WEAPONSMITH:</b> Roll 1d6 times on the <b>Weapon Groups</b> table on page 79 to see what sorts of weapons they carry. (Roll 2d6 times if you're going to narrow it down to the specific weapons they sell.)
13	<b>GROCER:</b> Carries all food items, except meals, from the Food and Lodging table in the <b>Equipment</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
14	<b>APOTHECARY:</b> Carries healer's kits as well as various salves and balms serving the same purpose. Depending on your setting and whether this business carries magical goods, they may carry the common items from the Temporary Magic Items section in the <b>Rewards</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
15	<b>BOOKSTORE:</b> Carries books as well as ink, paper, and other book-related goods as found on the Professional Gear table in the <b>Equipment</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
16	<b>MUSIC STORE:</b> Carries various types of musical instruments as found on the Professional Gear table in the <b>Equipment</b> chapter of the <i>Basic Rulebook</i> .
17-18	<b>DUAL-PURPOSE:</b> Serves multiple needs. Roll twice on this table to determine what they are. Re-roll if you get the same thing twice. (If you roll Dual-Purpose again, it's tri-purpose or more!)

## HOW MANY D6?

If you've never seen a table like the **Business Details** table before, you might be confused as to what you're supposed to roll. For tables like this, roll a single d6 once for each “d6” column there is. For example, for Business Details, you roll the d6 once and get a 3. Based on the first column, this tells you that your final result will be somewhere between “Distracted by Love” and “Reluctant Inheritor.” When you roll that same d6 again and get a 5, your final result is “A Sore Thumb.”

Alternatively, you can roll several d6 at once, one per column, but you need a way of knowing in advance what the order of the dice will be.

## BUSINESS DETAILS

D6 ROLL 1	D6 ROLL 2	RESULT
1	1	<b>CRIMINAL FRONT:</b> Roll on the <b>Criminal Enterprise</b> table on page 62 to see what this business is a front for. A particularly good <b>Perception (Empathy)</b> test allows a PC to notice something shady going on.
	2	<b>A FLY IN MY BEER:</b> A member of the party is ignored, their order is repeatedly wrong, their facilities are infested with bugs, or they are otherwise passive-aggressively mistreated. It so happens one of the employees has something against orcs or mages or people who wear hats indoors.
	3	<b>GOBLIN-MART:</b> Skip rolling on the <b>Cost</b> table, as this business sells all its goods at half the list price. It is owned by a wealthy noble from a faraway city who is actively trying to undercut the local competition. Most locals don't shop here and will not think kindly of travelers who do so.
	4	<b>WHAT DIED IN HERE?:</b> There is a horrendous smell coming from somewhere in this place, and none of the employees seem to notice it. The stench is like something—or several somethings—died and have been rotting for weeks. Characters suffer a -2 penalty to all tests from the distracting smell. Characters with the <b>Perception (Smelling)</b> focus suffer an additional -1 to all tests.
	5	<b>SOMETHING EXTRA:</b> Something illegal “accidentally” gets mixed in with a purchase. Hopefully the buyers notice the “mistake” before the local authorities do.
	6	<b>TRADE ONLY:</b> For whatever reason—maybe they don't like foreigners, maybe they don't trust currency in any form, or maybe they just really want something the PCs have—the proprietor of this shop absolutely refuses to do business in coin. All transactions must be in the form of a trade, either in goods or services.
2	1	<b>WEDDING PREP:</b> Though the employees are as helpful to the PCs as they are able, most of them are distracted getting ready for a wedding they are in some form catering to the very next day.
	2	<b>LOW STOCK:</b> Unfortunately, most of the stock is exceptionally low. For any item the PCs might want, roll 3d6: unless you get doubles, the shop is completely out of that item. On a roll with doubles, the stunt die represents how many of that item are left. It seems a stranger in town came in and bought up most of the inventory just this morning, and the shopkeep is still figuring out how they're going to resupply. Low stock can also be due to supply routes being interrupted by monsters and bandits.
	3	<b>RENOVATIONS!:</b> The proprietors are very excited to show off how lovely and new everything looks, having recently completed some rather nice renovations. Unfortunately, this has made funds a little tight, so they're less eager to haggle. Customers suffer a -2 penalty to <b>Communication (Bargaining)</b> tests.
	4	<b>CLEAN-UP CREW:</b> Tables are knocked over. Goods are scattered about. Lots of things are broken. A fight wrapped up just before the PCs arrived. The loser is lying bleeding on the floor, and the winner fled out the back.
	5	<b>SUPPLY BLOCKADE:</b> A PC making a successful <b>Perception (Hearing)</b> test overhears two employees discussing a problem in the supply chain—perhaps taxes, pirates, or disease—that could very quickly drive them out of business if something isn't done about it.
	6	<b>RECENT THEFT:</b> Other customers are discussing a recent theft and wondering aloud whether the proprietor will be able to stay in business.
3	1	<b>DISTRACTED BY LOVE:</b> The elderly couple who runs the place are adorably in love with each other. They just celebrated their fiftieth wedding anniversary, and are sweetly fawning over one another. They're so distracted, in fact, they suffer a -3 penalty to any <b>Perception</b> tests while their attention is turned away from their inventory. Other customers, if there are any, might either take advantage of this or call out anyone who tries to.
	2	<b>MONSTROUS MANAGEMENT:</b> The owner of this business is a werewolf, vampire, or some other monster that once was or can otherwise pass as mortal. They've run the business for years, and the locals either haven't noticed, don't care, or haven't mustered the courage to do anything about it.
	3	<b>MISSING!:</b> The owner hasn't been seen in a week. The employees are running the place as best they can, but they're starting to worry. Their boss is known to just not show up for work now and again, but never for this long at once.
	4	<b>HAVE YOU HEARD?:</b> The proprietor is very into their religion and tries to talk about it with anyone who listens. They're not too pushy about it, but they do ask for a donation to their church with every purchase and invite customers to religious services. They offer no discounts for like-minded individuals, as those individuals should obviously want this business to thrive so it can continue to serve the church.
	5	<b>A SORE THUMB:</b> The person in charge does not seem to be dressed appropriately for the class of business they run at all. If the business sells high-end goods, the owner is grimy and dressed in rags. If the business is a common shop, they are dressed incredibly flamboyantly and with glittering jewelry. An innkeep might greet guests in full plate armor, or a grocer might sell fruit while wearing a military uniform.
	6	<b>RELUCTANT INHERITOR:</b> The teenage owner of this business recently inherited it from what was their only living relative. They have absolutely no idea how to run the place and don't really want to anyway, but they very much want to see their deceased relative's legacy live on.

## BUSINESS DETAILS

D6 ROLL 1	D6 ROLL 2	RESULT
4	1	<b>TERRIBLE FLIRT:</b> One of the employees develops an instant crush on one of PCs (pick at random). They don't have any authority to offer discounts or freebies, but they do try terribly hard to chat up the PC. Unfortunately, they're particularly bad at it, dropping lines like "I really like your elbows," and "That smudge of dirt on your face is very flattering."
	2	<b>PET NAMES:</b> One of the employees seems to have a particular skill for coming up with animal-related pet names for everyone. "Right this way, Bunny." "Here you are, Pooch." If anyone complains about it, they apologize shyly and back away, offering further assistance only if specifically asked.
	3	<b>ASLEEP AT THE WHEEL:</b> A perceptive PC notices someone asleep in a quiet corner. It's an employee of the business trying to catch a nap after a very late and raucous night out. Their boss would not be too pleased to find them here.
	4	<b>I QUIT!:</b> Out of nowhere, someone quits, loudly, and storms off.
	5	<b>OVERSTAFFED:</b> There are at least twice as many people working here as need to be, and nothing about the place suggests any reason they should be able to afford so many extra bodies just hanging around being unproductive.
	6	<b>OVERQUALIFIED:</b> Whenever the proprietor is asked a question they should know the answer to, they subtly turn their eyes to one particular employee who answers the question expertly. Whatever is made here, everyone insists it is the owner's product being sold, but nevertheless, this one employee is the one who seems to have all the knowledge.
5	1	<b>GOING OUT OF BUSINESS:</b> Skip rolling on the <b>Cost</b> table, as this business is soon to be no more. Perhaps the proprietor has been driven out by the competition. Perhaps they've just had a run of bad luck. Either way, their poor fortune is the PCs' good fortune, as everything, including the fixtures, must go at half-off the list price. Characters also get a +2 bonus to Communication (Bargaining) tests while shopping here, but all sales are final.
	2	<b>THANK YOU!:</b> The owner of this establishment recognizes the party from tales of their good deeds and offers them 25% off anything they want to buy. This is in addition to any modifiers applied by rolling on the <b>Cost</b> table.
	3	<b>WINE TASTING:</b> The local vineyard is hosting a small tasting here. They have various varieties for sale at 2 sp per bottle, and they gladly encourage customers to sample each of them. The business hosting the tasting is more than happy to have their customers' purses loosened slightly, and they'll buy a bottle for anyone spending more than 2 gp in the shop.
	4	<b>BOGO50:</b> There's a sale going on right now where customers can buy any two items and get the cheaper of the two for half price. For inns, every second night of the characters' stay is half-off.
	5	<b>BETTER THAN EXPECTED:</b> One character who spends money here ends up with a product slightly better than expected. If this is equipment, that might mean a +1 to damage or Armor Rating. For food or lodging, it turns out their meal or room is far fancier than expected.
	6	<b>THOUSANDTH CUSTOMER!:</b> The proprietor screams in delight at the first PC to spend money here. As the business' thousandth customer, the PC is rewarded with a prize appropriate to the establishment: a free night in the fanciest room, half off their entire purchase, or treatment as a guest of honor at the party later this evening. This should be a memorable event. The character might even receive a noteworthy piece of gear, but the value should not overshadow the sorts of things you usually give as adventure rewards.
6	1-5	<b>MAGICAL INVENTORY:</b> This shop has between one and five magical items for sale and priced accordingly. Get creative for businesses not selling physical goods. A magically restful night's sleep might provide +1 to all rolls the following day. A magically filling meal might negate the need to eat for a week. If you get this result multiple times, simply add to the number of arcane goods available.
	6	<b>WHAT'S THIS?:</b> The character with the best result on an <b>Intelligence (Arcane Lore)</b> test spots something for sale the proprietor clearly doesn't realize is magical. Use the <b>Magic Item</b> table most appropriate for this business, adding the stunt die from the Arcane Lore test to the result of the first roll on the <b>Magical Properties</b> table on page 79. In the case of a business that doesn't sell physical goods, a room key hanging on a rack or a mug behind a bar could have as-yet unperceived magical properties. It's up to the PC whether they take advantage of this find or tell the proprietor of their oversight.

## INNS

3D6	RESULT
3	<b>ONE ROOM LEFT:</b> There's only one room left. Fortunately, it's got enough sleep space for the entire party. Unfortunately, a gruesome murder happened there recently and they haven't quite gotten everything cleaned up. A character who decides to look around and makes a successful <b>Perception (Searching)</b> test finds a yet-undiscovered clue about the murder.
4	<b>FLEA-BITTEN:</b> A character making a successful <b>Perception (Empathy)</b> test realizes there's something they're not being told about the room they rented. The room is actually infested with fleas, which the character gets a second chance to discover with a <b>Perception (Seeing)</b> test upon entering the room. If anyone ends up sleeping in the room, they spend the next 1d6 days scratching uncontrollably, resulting in a -1 penalty to all tests. An exceptionally thorough – or possibly professional – bath can solve the problem more quickly.
5	<b>"THE LOFT":</b> Everything is sold out, but they'd be happy to rent out the hay loft in the barn outside for a few copper pieces.
6	<b>COMMON ROOM ONLY:</b> All the actual rooms are sold out, but there's floor space in the common room available.
7	<b>NOISY NEIGHBORS:</b> One of the PCs ends up with a room next to some very rambunctious neighbors. These people could be fighting, having a private party, or engaged in loud amorous activity, and are unlikely to quiet down even if asked. The PCs in the adjacent room are unable to get enough rest to recover Health or Magic Points.
8	<b>ISN'T THIS MY ROOM?:</b> One of the other guests had "tee many martoonis" and in their inebriated state thinks the PCs' room is their room. Depending on whether the PCs remembered to lock their door, this could either result in some loud banging or an unfortunate surprise on the bedroom floor in the morning.
9	<b>SUBPAR:</b> The rooms the characters are given don't really seem to be worth the price they paid, but they're at least passable for the night.
10-13	<b>TAVERN:</b> Lodging is often combined with food and drink service. Roll on the <b>Taverns</b> table to add tavern-specific details. (If this inn is already a tavern because of a Dual-Purpose roll, ignore this result and re-roll.)
14	<b>THERE'S A POOL!:</b> There's a pool!
15	<b>FREE UPGRADE:</b> The only room available to whichever PC is last to ask for one is a much fancier suite than the rest. Since the room often goes unrented, the proprietor offers the upgraded room at the same price as all the rest. The offer will, of course, be rescinded if any of the other PCs try to cancel their rooms.
16	<b>WHERE DOES THIS LEAD?:</b> A PC making a successful <b>Perception (Searching)</b> test in their room finds a hidden passageway behind the walls of the inn! It might simply be a secret exit, or it could lead to a long-hidden basement or just about anywhere else.
17	<b>THIS ISN'T MY ROOM:</b> One of the PCs has a room adjoining that of another patron. The neighboring guest doesn't realize the door leads to someone else's quarters and bursts in at the least opportune time. Exceptionally apologetic, they offer to pay for the PC's room for as long as they're staying (up to a month).
18	<b>CONVENTION SEASON!:</b> It just so happens there's a convention of magic-users happening right now, which unfortunately means every room is sold out for miles, but characters willing to hang out for a while might find some useful goods for sale, fascinating lectures to attend, or interesting characters to interact with.

## TAVERNS

2D6	RESULT
2	<b>POISONED:</b> Someone in the kitchen or behind the bar is either horribly negligent or has it out for one of the PCs. Something in their food or drink sits very poorly with them, causing all sorts of uncomfortable bodily disruptions and causing the character to suffer a -2 to all tests for the next 1d6 days unless they can find a suitable remedy. A perceptive PC might notice the problem before ingesting it with a successful <b>Perception (Smelling)</b> test.
3-4	<b>UNSATISFYING FARE:</b> The drinks are obviously watered down and the food is poorly made. The server offers no apologies if complaints are lodged.
5	<b>KITCHEN FIRE:</b> While the PCs are drinking or dining, someone comes running out of the kitchen yelling "fire!" It gets out of hand very quickly and will turn into catastrophe in moments if nobody takes charge to get people safely out of the building and put out the fire.
6	<b>FIGHT!:</b> A fight breaks out among the other patrons, and one of the fighters comes crashing through the party's table.
7	<b>HOW YOU DOIN'?:</b> A suave barfly tries to pick up one of the PCs. If their advances are clearly unwanted, they apologize sincerely and later buy the party a round in secret.
8	<b>DINING ALONE:</b> The PC with the best <b>Perception (Seeing)</b> result notices one patron who has been sitting alone at a table for two the entire time they've been there. There's a bottle of wine on the table and two glasses, but not a drop has been drunk.
9	<b>ARM-WRESTLING:</b> Some patrons are having a friendly arm-wrestling tournament. Loser buys the winner a drink. Anyone is welcome to try, with each match settled by an opposed <b>Strength (Might)</b> test.
10	<b>LIVE MUSIC:</b> A musician is here playing music and singing for tips. They sing a song of an ancient treasure lost in nearby waters.
11	<b>FREE DESSERT:</b> A local entrepreneur is giving out free desserts to drum up business for their about-to-open bakery. They encourage feedback, but get a little emotional at anything particularly positive or negative.
12	<b>A ROUND FOR THE HOUSE!:</b> A young patron is celebrating coming into a large sum of money they are certain is about to turn into an even larger sum. They buy a round for everyone at the tavern, which is greatly appreciated by all, but also catches the eye of a shady character or two.



## BUILDING CHARACTERS

**N**on-player characters (NPCs) encompass all sentient life—or unlife—controlled by the GM rather than a player. These people flesh out the world beyond dungeons, monsters, and loot and are essential to most campaigns. Here we'll discuss the purpose of using characters in your campaign, then we'll go over how to design them and play them, and finally we'll step through a few examples of character design.

### USING CHARACTERS

To the party, other characters can be allies or adversaries, friends or foils, drives or distractions. Characters can plant the seeds for adventure, present obstacles to progress, or offer opportunities for roleplaying.

We're not talking about "There's a shopkeeper. He sells everything on page 59 of the *Basic Rulebook*." This is about "Solomon, proprietor of *The Adventurer's Companion*, has been a staple of this community for fifty years. He knows most of his neighbors' secrets but isn't one to share them openly. He lost both his daughters to war and would do anything to reunite with his estranged son. He has a wicked scar across his face from a tangle with a living doll and is now deathly afraid of marionettes. Also, he sells everything on page 59 of the *Basic Rulebook*." Not every person the party encounters needs an elaborate backstory and inspiring goals, but a world barren of noteworthy characters beyond the PCs probably won't be terribly interesting for long.

One of the main uses of NPCs of any sort is to help move the story forward. NPCs let the heroes know there is adventure to be had! In practice, this could be as direct as a character-in-need seeing the party, obviously dressed for danger, and approaching them to ask for help.

But it could be subtler: The party is visiting the local blacksmith looking to spend some of the cash they earned on their last adventure. The warrior notices a particularly fine example of craftsmanship hanging above the door and asks the blacksmith the price. "Oh, *Waterdancer* isn't for sale," she replies, "It belonged to my wife." She trails off sadly before continuing, "You know, it's been a long time since I told the story of how she found it. Could I treat you all to dinner in exchange for letting me talk your ears off a bit? It's a tale worth telling. And worth hearing, I think." If the party joins her, she tells the story, wherein she describes a place she doesn't know the location of, but which one of the heroes recognizes from their own backstory, and they know exactly where it is. The blacksmith concludes her story by noting the carvings on *Waterdancer*, which provide the means to acquire some hidden knowledge or treasure at the same location.

Now the blacksmith is a character. She's advanced the story and given the heroes a goal without saying, "Hey, I need you to go do a thing." She could turn into a dear friend if the heroes decide to return with an epilogue to the story she told, or she could become a terrible foe if they steal *Waterdancer* because she refuses to part with it and they assume copies of the carvings won't be enough to help them reach their goal.



Other characters give the PCs something to care about in the world you're building together. The heroes want to save the world—not just because it's where they keep their stuff, but also because it's where they keep their friends and family. Characters can even be romantic interests, though be sure to avoid the trap of sex as a reward. In a long campaign, PCs could even see a child grow into a young adventurer, inspired by their heroic parent.

Once the PCs have established characters who are their friends and foes, putting those friends in peril from those foes is a great way to motivate the party to action. Remember when the party reunited Solomon with his estranged son? Well now the son is back with news of the blacksmith getting herself a dangerous magical doodad and holding his father ransom until Waterdancer is returned. If only the party hadn't had to destroy Waterdancer to get through the labyrinth!

Your players' party is probably not the only group of adventurers in the world. If the duchess needs help tracking down her missing nephew, she might hire two groups to investigate just as easily as one. Having an entire other adventuring party on the same mission can provide opportunities for PCs to develop camaraderie or friendly rivalry with those NPCs. Flesh out this other party as deeply as you like, but pay attention to the characters the PCs interact with the most, either in positive or negative ways. This can give insight as to which NPCs might make good long-term enemies or

allies. Another group on the same mission can also provide opportunities for clues if the PCs are struggling. Maybe they spot the other party staking out the shady bar the PCs didn't know was a favorite haunt of the duchess' nephew. Perhaps the other party comes to the PCs asking for aid when one of their own is killed trying to infiltrate the kidnappers' sanctum.

Some of the best NPCs are those who show up again and again. It's always nice to see a familiar face, even if it's a face the PCs really want to stab repeatedly and vigorously. Also remember that characters can die, and sometimes death is the most appropriate end for even the most thought-out and beloved NPC.

## DESIGNING CHARACTERS

When you first start designing a character, you probably already know some things about them. At the very least, you know whether you need a villain, an ally, or some other broad category of character. Start with whatever ideas you have and jot those down somewhere to serve as reminders while you're filling out details. Circle or highlight important information, and don't be afraid to change your mind. More importantly, don't be afraid to do things in a different order than how we present it or to ignore our advice completely. If an approach works for you, keep using it!

## ABILITIES & POWERS

Good characters are much more than abilities and powers, but they're probably going to need them, so we'll start there. Three good ways of building the mechanics of a character are by-the-book level progression, freeform design, and modifying an existing character, though often you'll use some combination of these.

## BY-THE-BOOK

The most straightforward way to create characters is to use the rules provided in the **Character Creation** chapter of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and then level them up one level at a time. This is a particularly good approach if this is your first time creating NPCs, if you are designing characters you expect to fight directly alongside the party as allies, or if you want to be as certain as possible the characters are a statistically equal match for the PCs.

As you get practiced at this approach, you will find yourself able to shortcut the level-up process. Need to bump a character from level 1 to level 8? Take four primary abilities and focuses, three secondary abilities and focuses, three degrees of a specialization, and three talent levels. You can work on those all at once rather than one level at a time, and then go back and add class-specific bonuses you haven't already applied. If you're doing a lot of levels at once and are a stickler for the rules, a spreadsheet can be very handy for keeping track of how many advancements you've distributed and how many you have left. But don't forget it's a number of ability *advancements* you're distributing, not ability points.

### RANDOM RELATIONSHIPS

The **Relationships** table is used to determine the connections between important characters in a setting. This can be used for anything from connecting two noble NPCs from the same family to determining how numerous gods in a pantheon relate to each other.

Use of this table is recommended only when some sort of connection is presumed already. You don't need to roll to see how two strangers in a bar are related, but you may wish to use it to determine how two characters at a large family reunion are. When designing a large group bound by blood and kin, this table can help create interesting connections that inspire roleplaying and suggest numerous conflicts and alliances.

RELATIONSHIPS	
2D6	RESULT
2	None
3	Grandparent and Grandchild
4	Enemies
5	Cousins
6	Aunt/Uncle and Niece/Nephew
7	Allies
8	Friends
9	Siblings
10	Parent and Child
11	Lovers
12	Married

Modding from other games using the *Adventure Game Engine (AGE)* such as *Blue Rose* or *Dragon Age* is among the easiest methods of generation, since even when mechanics and statistics don't line up perfectly, they are more alike than different. Modifying characters from other RPGs or sources is trickier, but with a bit of practice it gets easier. In these cases, the biggest challenge is usually determining how different scales of levels, powers, and other abilities match up. This is made easier by *Fantasy AGE's* ability bonuses mapping directly to the numbers they add to tests, though the dice rolled for tests also must be considered, as should other bonuses. For example, if another RPG has a system where a Strength of 18 grants a +4 bonus and uses a d20 to make those tests, then a Strength-based test generates a roll of around 14 to 15 on average on tests (+4 bonus plus an average roll of 10 or 11). In *Fantasy AGE*, where the average 3d6 test also comes out to 11, you can simulate the source character's Strength with a Strength of 4. Easy? Well, mostly.

What if this game uses Strength for melee combat instead of having a Fighting ability? You need to also look at the fighting prowess of the character and see if their abilities should be adjusted up or down. While some of this may also be handled with focuses and talents, characters may sometimes need to have their abilities divided and reorganized to make them "feel" right during play. Thus, a skilled warrior in a game that uses Strength directly on attack rolls in combat but who is not otherwise portrayed as performing great acts of physicality might not have a Strength ability that maps directly to the average bonuses in *Fantasy AGE*. This character might instead have a lower Strength and a higher Fighting to represent how they use their physical prowess in play.

This gets even more difficult when a system is vastly different than *Fantasy AGE*, using dice pools and static results adjusted up and down by dice rolls. Looking at averages and the math behind the design is still helpful, but it can become confusing or time-consuming for some GMs. In these cases, it's best to alter, modify, and redesign using the rules as needed based on what a character can do within the setting, rather than trying to come up with direct conversions between greatly different systems.

## FREEFORM DESIGN

NPCs absolutely do not need to follow the standard level progression PCs follow. They don't even need to follow the same class structure PCs follow. If it makes sense for the character, don't be afraid to give a spell and some Magic Points to a warrior or to give a few degrees of Thievery to a mage. You can even throw out the concept of classes entirely and simply pick whatever features fit the character concept.

Don't feel like you need to stick to the talents available within the rules either. NPCs can be whatever the story needs them to be and do anything the story needs them to do.

## MODIFYING EXISTING CHARACTERS

Borrow good ideas from absolutely everywhere. Assuming you're creating characters for a game you're running for your friends and you're not writing professionally or academically, do not be afraid to steal other people's good ideas. It can be a lot of work creating new characters from scratch every gaming session, and there's no reason to constantly reinvent the wheel. Need an elf or dwarf archer? Base them off Kiliel from *Titansgrave: The Ashes of Valkana*. Need a winged half-demon warrior? Base them off Gethsemene in the **Adversary Examples: Master and Minion** section of this chapter. Did a PC die and now their brother is coming after the party for revenge? Base the brother off the dead PC!

If you find a preexisting character that is statistically exactly what you need, just copy their abilities and move on to personality. In most cases, you will probably find an existing character close to what you're looking for, but not a perfect fit. In this case, start by copying everything, and then modify those statistics as necessary—a process called "modding." If you feel like your inspiration character is already well balanced, try to remove something for everything you add. For abili-

ties, focuses, and talents, this is fairly easy. For things like stunts, bonuses, and powers, it can be trickier. A good rule to follow is like-for-like. If you're adding a damage-focused power, figure out roughly how much damage you're giving them per turn, then take something away of about the same damage. This can be as easy as re-skinning a weapon into a power. Does your inspiration character have a long sword that deals 2d6+4 damage with their Strength bonus? Drop the sword and add the power to shock people with a touch, dealing the same amount of damage but this time based on their Willpower.

You can also mix modding with a by-the-book approach. If the inspiration character has a level and a class but they're too low-powered for the PCs, just level them up by the book until you get them to where you need them.

## PERSONALITY

Your characters are more than lists of abilities and talents. They're people with personalities who live within the story you are telling with your players. They have their own goals and motivations, interests and desires. They give the story life beyond the PCs.

When designing a character's personality, avoid making them entirely one-sided. Though people who do good simply because it is good absolutely exist, a character is more interesting when they have additional motivation. An ally might have done a terrible wrong they are trying to right, have a loved one they are trying to make the world better for, or just desperately want to be liked. These motivations don't have to be something the PCs ever learn, but they're worth writing down to remind yourself while playing them. The same goes for foes. The villain rarely sees themselves as the villain, and an enemy who is evil purely for the sake of evil is more of a monster than a character. Give your villains a reason for what

they're doing. It doesn't have to be a good reason, but the reason should make sense to the villain. Even "I want to rule the world" doesn't have to be "because I will be a good ruler." It can just be "because I've been treated poorly too often." Whatever the character's goal is, come up with a motivation that drives them toward it.

For a character likely to recur, it can be beneficial to come up with a unique trait for them and exaggerate it. Exaggerate it a lot. For all the work you put into perfectly balancing the archmage against the party's strengths and weaknesses, the thing the players are going to remember and talk about is his utter disgust for blue and how this drove him to nearly eviscerate the party's archer. Caricaturizing a personality trait can also give the players inspiration for strategies you haven't thought of. Archmage hates blue? A bucket of blue paint sounds like an excellent opening salvo. Just be sure the entire character doesn't become a caricature—unless this is what you're going for!

For any sort of character where you need to find nuance to their personality beyond "good guy" and "bad guy," a thesaurus can be a handy tool. Good leads to worthy leads to earnest leads to intense. "Intense" sounds like a great descriptor to apply to an ally you're designing, which in turn can lead to inspiration in designing their background.

## BACKGROUND

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Characters don't pop into existence the first time the heroes meet them. They have had entire lives leading them to the exact moment when their paths crossed with the party's. Certainly you do not need to write out their entire life story, but the more you know about what led them to be who they are, the easier it will be for you to engage as them, and the more the players will enjoy engaging with them. The backgrounds in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* are a great place to start, but don't be afraid to expand from there. What has the character been doing with their life up to this point? What was their childhood like? Who are their enemies and allies? What had they been doing with their day up until the PCs met them? Get as detailed as you want, but the more important a character is likely to be to the story, the more time it's worth devoting to their background and what led them to where they are today.

## ROLES

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We've mentioned the broad categories of villains and allies, but there are narrower categories of roles characters can fill as well, some of which can fall into both or neither of these broader two.

## BENEFACTOR

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Benefactors are your most common quest-givers. They've got the resources to fund expeditions and hand out rewards, but they generally lack the motivation or ability to attain their goals themselves. Benefactors usually have a much higher social status than the adventurers and probably want to keep it this way. They pay appropriately for services rendered, but they don't suddenly become best friends with PCs even if they go far above the call of duty.

Naturally there might be reasons a benefactor could become particularly fond of the PCs. Rescuing children from kidnappers, guarding the castle from invaders, or lifting the curse plaguing the household are all acts easily leading to closer bonds with a benefactor. Just be careful not to make the PCs feel like the benefactor's resources are theirs to do with as they please, or you will have a much harder time motivating them with material rewards in the future.

Benefactors can of course also be sources of nonmaterial rewards like reputation and goal-fulfillment.

## BYSTANDER

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Bystanders can be pure flavor for a setting. Their goals and motivations don't need to tie into the PCs' at all, but they can still have enough personality to make them noteworthy and memorable. Bystanders make locations and adventures more memorable by making the people in them feel more real. It's because of bystanders that Brighton isn't "the town where we all bought new armor," and is instead "the town where we met Deb, who convinced us all to buy armor with purple accents and whose cat kept sitting on my head!"

Bystanders can also springboard into almost any other role, depending on how PCs react to them and where the story takes you. They most easily turn into friends if the PCs particularly like them, but they can shift into other roles as well. The betrayal will sting far worse if the NPC who provided the party's location to their enemies is someone they remember rather than a faceless, unnamed informant.

Bystanders can be pure prose—no abilities or powers needed. If you end up having to make a test for a bystander, come up with an appropriate ability score on the spot and write it down for later.

## FOIL

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A foil can be a fantastic crossbreed of ally and villain if they have traits particularly grinding to one of the PCs but are otherwise beneficial to the party. A good foil enhances the qualities of another character by highlighting their differences.

For example, the PC Reza is a tremendous flirt. He chats up nearly any friendly NPC, has left a meaningful relationship or two behind in previous towns, and has a budding romance with one of the other PCs, Ashana. Sir Villem is an NPC noble whose powerful aunt will be introduced as a potential benefactor in a future session. Villem fancies himself a ladies' man and sees dating as a bit of a sport. When most of the party is around, he's very friendly and helpful and supportive, and he particularly befriends Elden, the socially awkward mage, by inviting him out to a party. Villem sees Reza flirting with everyone and decides making Reza's life miserable would be a fun game to play. He is absolutely cruel to Reza any time they are alone, lying to authorities to get him arrested, lying about his growing relationship with Ashana, and doing whatever he can to make Reza look bad. On the whole, he's an ally to the party, showing them around town, introducing them to the right people, and helping out here and there with financial resources. But his vile behavior and chauvinistic outlook on relationships also serve to highlight Reza's

flirty and romantic nature as loving and caring for people, not possessing or conquering them.

## FRIEND

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Friends can be great sources of motivation. There's nothing like a loved one in peril to drive someone to action. They're also good resources for information or other assistance, within reason. A friend in the local peacekeeping force isn't going to break the PCs out of prison, but they might speak in the characters' favor at court. They might even destroy evidence, depending on how close the tie and how great the risk.

Unless you're playing in a particularly dark setting, friends don't need to be put in jeopardy at every turn to stay relevant to the story. Friends asking for perfectly mundane favors can springboard into other adventures. Do you need to get the PCs to the capital but can't have them know it's because they're wanted for treason? Perhaps a friend needs an escort or has invited them for a visit.

## HENCHMAN

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Henchmen are the most noteworthy subordinates to a mastermind. They are well fleshed-out characters with motivations of their own aligning closely enough with their leader to make them useful. They make for excellent short-term or even long-term villains depending on the length and breadth of your campaign. It can be a good idea to give henchmen unique powers or equipment to make them stand out to combat-oriented players, but as always, what's going to be most memorable to most players is their personality and their actions.

## LACKEY

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Lackeys are your lowest—often unnamed—bad guys. They're there to do a thing because they were told to do a thing, usually with violence. Bandits, mercenaries, robbers, and thugs are all typical lackeys. Lackeys are also the ground troops for masterminds and henchmen, creating combat situations requiring more strategy than "Everyone gang up on the Big Bad!"

Despite their low power, lackeys can still be interesting and memorable. It's usually easiest to base lackeys on a common design you can produce quickly, but you can then add a unique power or put them in a unique circumstance to make the encounter interesting. For example, a pack of goblins might all be carrying grenades, opening up the Kaboom! stunt, or a lone mercenary might carry a poisoned dagger, requiring the party to quest for an antidote after one of them is stabbed.



## MASTERMIND

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Masterminds are your Big Bads. They are the architects behind everything the heroes are opposing. They're often the driving forces behind entire campaigns. These are potentially the characters you will spend the most time designing, with detailed backstories, unique powers, and just the right amount of force to make them a true challenge for the party without being insurmountable.

The challenge of a mastermind, however, does not always have to come from raw power. The challenge to overcome could just be getting to the mastermind, if they have surrounded themselves with powerful henchmen and lackeys. They might actually be

very easy to defeat in combat if the challenge lies in just getting to them or even discovering who they are.

Some of the best masterminds present themselves as allies of some sort for the majority of an adventure or campaign before their true motivations and intentions are discovered. Or a mastermind could seem to be quite good to most of the world, and only the heroes know their true nature, forcing the party to either work to expose them or face the repercussions of killing a perceived innocent.

## PARTY MEMBER

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Allies might join the party for a single session, an adventure, or even the bulk of a campaign. They usually work best if they are designed using precisely by-the-book character creation so they are on par with the PCs. If a character who wasn't initially intended as a party member becomes one for any reason and they already have some not-by-the-book powers, do your best to balance them in other ways so the party doesn't come to simply rely on the NPC to get them out of every sticky situation.

Party members are probably the characters you want to be the most careful with. While it can be fun to have a surrogate PC for yourself in the campaign you are running, the story you are telling should be about the other players' characters, and all other characters should serve as supporting cast. Don't let NPC party members be problem solvers unless the players are all completely stuck for solutions. Don't give them the killing blow in an important fight. And definitely don't shy away from letting them die if it's strategically sound for the villains to go after them or if it's just good for the story.

So what should you use NPC party members for? If your group often has guest players, it can be great to have a character you can hand them to play for the session. Party members can also be good gap-fillers if none of your players felt like making a character with any healing ability or door-bashing strength. They can also be good roleplaying drivers if the players aren't particularly good at doing this themselves. Sometimes having an NPC around just to say, "So what do you all think of this?" can be key in getting conversation going.

## THE ART OF PLAYING CHARACTERS

If you're going through the trouble of designing a character, you're probably intending to actually play them to some degree rather than just sticking them in a fight against the PCs to be slaughtered. Like the players play their characters, so do you play all the rest.

### ACTING!

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It is absolutely okay if you're not a great actor. If you happen to be, wonderful! But nothing says you need to be convincing as a character for the character to be convincing. Do your best. Your players will appreciate it. But if you can't convey "bittersweet pride" on cue, don't be afraid to just tell the players,

"she says with bittersweet pride." Nobody expects you to turn on the sprinklers when it's raining in-game, so let yourself write characters you won't be able to perfectly portray. However, giving your characters a voice can both help you get into the character and help the players lock onto an image of who is speaking. Again, give yourself leeway. This is a fantasy setting, not the real world, so while you might not be able to replicate a Russian accent, you can still create a perfect Dwarven accent. The bit of Southern Belle you fall into when thinking of home might be a perfect voice for the elf prince. Even just subtle shifts in tone can help separate a character's voice from your own—just be careful you don't fall into harmful or stereotypical speech patterns.

## SCRIPTED VS. ORGANIC DIALOGUE

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If you have a character who needs to provide information to the party, you might wonder whether you should write out scripted responses to likely questions or just jot down key points and respond as organically as possible. There are two answers to this question. The first answer is "both." The second answer is "whichever works better for you."

Writing out a scripted monologue describing the problem the NPC is asking the heroes to solve along with a list of likely questions and scripted answers can be extremely helpful in finding a character's voice. You can figure out the character's conversational tone, decide what information is important enough for them to mention up front, and make sure you've thought out all the important details of the story this conversation is leading to. But players don't always ask things quite in the way you expect them to or think of asking all the questions you think are important.

So, write out those scripted answers. Read them and re-read them until you know everything the character knows. When it comes to engaging with the PCs, refer to your list as much as you're comfortable with, but when they go off-script, you'll know the details well enough to respond organically. And if you don't know the details well enough, it's okay. You can refer back to your script and come up with a way to word the information to make sense for what the PCs asked. More than likely, the players will ask questions you weren't expecting, then you'll have to wing it anyway.

If you find you are someone who is good at organic dialogue and you often struggle with finding the right information within a scripted response, those scripted responses can still be helpful in finding your character's voice, but you might want to come to the table with just a list of key points you can cross off as you cover them. This will help make sure the pertinent information gets out without forcing you to fumble over your own dialogue.

For anything other than short-term characters, you will probably have to come up with organic responses at some point. All the work you've done up to this point in designing the character's abilities, personality, background, and role will help you do this. By now you know who they are as much as you could possibly need to, and you know how they'll respond to whatever the PCs throw at them. And if you need a moment to think of a response, take a moment. It's okay.

## CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

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People are not static. Characters are much more interesting when they grow and change over the course of an adventure. Spend some time after each session thinking about how the events of the session affected the NPCs who were present for those events. Not every interaction with the PCs needs to cause a drastic change, but if the party rescues an innkeeper from the grips of an eldritch crown, his inn might have signs declaring “No Hats Allowed! Remove all helmets and headgear before entering!” the next time the adventurers visit.

Development over the course of a campaign is particularly important for long-term characters, especially those who travel with the party. If these characters frequently see or are involved in harrowing events, it’s going to harden them. If they see the PCs frequently engaging in heroic deeds, it could inspire them to heroism as well. These sorts of changes can also allow the players to see how their characters’ actions affect the world around them.

It’s a great idea to think about how you’d like a character to develop when you’re first creating them. But allow yourself to change this development plan if the story goes in a different direction than you originally thought it would. If you introduced a scoundrel you hoped the PCs would inspire to change his roguish ways, but instead they followed his lead and started getting involved in shadier dealings, you’re going to have to rethink that character’s progression. There’s nothing wrong with this, because it means you’re giving the players agency to drive the story, which is absolutely what you should be doing.

## COMMON PITFALLS

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There are a few common pitfalls you’ll want to avoid when playing characters in your campaign.

### PLAYING FAVORITES

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It’s worth mentioning again the campaign should be about the PCs, not about the NPCs, who instead make up the supporting cast. NPCs can absolutely be integral to the plot and can be amazingly memorable and well-crafted, but if the best thing for the story is for your favorite NPC to die, then you mustn’t be afraid to kill your darlings. Did you put a PC’s only sibling in danger to motivate them to action and yet they failed to act? Sorry, kid, you’re an only child now. This is collaborative story-telling, and as the storyteller with the most power, you must yield this power whenever possible to the players.

### HOGGING THE SPOTLIGHT

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Also in the interest of allowing the players to drive the story, avoid letting NPCs provide the solutions to problems. If the players are absolutely stuck, then an NPC-to-the-rescue might be your only recourse, but it can often be more interesting to let the heroes fail and see how the story progresses from there. In some cases, the story can’t progress, so you might even consider changing the solution to fit something the PCs are trying before allowing an NPC to grab the glory.



# CRIMINAL ENTERPRISES

The crime family or criminal syndicate is a staple of various genres of fiction. From modern thrillers to science fiction, criminal empires, gangsters, and gangs are common protagonists and antagonists. Fantasy is no exception and GMs needing inspiration can use the following tables to generate criminal groups and enterprises for use in their games.

When generating a criminal organization, combine the results of the tables with ideas about the structure, leadership, base of operations, and notable characters. Larger gangs and syndicates often have multiple hideouts and their leaders are surrounded by numerous bodyguards and lieutenants.

Most criminal operations are organized around a single powerful leader or perhaps a powerful family. Other gangs and syndicates are run like guilds, with influential members voting on the organization's actions. A few gangs are essentially cults that take direction from supernatural forces, including demons and gods. In addition to any places of criminal operation, criminal organizations usually have one or more hideouts or bases. A small gang may have a single hideout, while a large crime syndicate may have dozens of such sites scattered across several nations.

Criminal organizations, especially larger ones, are often involved in local politics, religion, and businesses. GMs may use the other tables throughout this book to flesh out what specific groups a criminal organization is involved with.

LEADERSHIP	
1D6	LEADERSHIP TYPE
1-2	<b>BIG BOSS:</b> Single leader who rules by force or charisma.
3-4	<b>FAMILY:</b> Dominated by a single family. Relatives by blood or marriage dominate leadership. Large groups may have associated families and offshoots.
5	<b>COMMITTEE:</b> Influential "made" members vote on jobs, rules, etc. Group usually elects chairperson or other representative to deal with outsiders and serve as a figurehead.
6	<b>CULT:</b> Operates like a quasi-religious order filled with various rites and doctrines. Roll again to see what form the leadership of the cult takes. If another 6 is rolled, some supernatural force directs and rules members such as a demon, god, or spirit.

BASES & HIDEOUTS	
2D6	BASE/HIDEOUT TYPE
2	Castle/Fortress
3-4	Cave or Underground Structure (abandoned mine, catacombs, sewers)
5-6	Seemingly Legitimate Business (inn, warehouse, shipyard)
7	Mobile (no specific base or hideout)
8-9	Camp (rural) or Slums (urban)
10-11	Obviously Shady Business (gambling parlor, brothel, illegal fight club, drug den)
12	Ruins of Important Landmark or Structure

# CRIMINAL ENTERPRISES

3D6	CRIMINAL ENTERPRISE TYPE
3	<b>SENTIENT TRAFFICKING:</b> Capturing, enslaving, or illegally transporting sentient creatures for profit.
4	<b>"WITCH" HUNTERS:</b> "Witch" is a placeholder term for any mystic or otherwise talented individual with abilities feared by the general populace. Criminal witch hunters tend to run their operations as a scam or terror campaign, accusing innocents or harmless members of these groups for profit.
5	<b>BLACKMAIL/EXTORTION:</b> Includes protection rackets and frame jobs, where victims are targeted by the organization and must pay to avoid further troubles.
6	<b>PIRACY:</b> Consists of a pirate fleet of 1d6-1 ships. On a 0, the pirates recently lost their last ship and are seeking to acquire another.
7	<b>FORGERY:</b> Making and selling counterfeit coins, official documents, and other valuables.
8	<b>HIGHWAY ROBBERS:</b> From dashing highwaymen to murderous bandits, they rob travelers, occasionally holding valuable victims for ransom.
9	<b>LARCENY:</b> Theft of a wide variety and scale, ranging from pickpocket rings to burglary, or even well organized heists.
10	<b>THUGS FOR HIRE:</b> Hires out muscle to other criminal organizations and anyone else with the money and inclination to employ known criminals to do violence.
11	<b>ILLEGAL GAMBLING:</b> Running illicit and possibly rigged games of chance. Includes illegal duels, pit fights, and anything else customers will bet on.
12	<b>SNAKE OIL SALESMEN:</b> Dealing in fake medicine and magic. May also sell some real items among the false.
13	<b>SMUGGLING:</b> Secretly transports goods and people to avoid taxes, legal restrictions, and other obstacles.
14	<b>ILLEGAL SERVICES:</b> Provides services outlawed in a particular area. Examples include providing medical services and hiding places for wanted felons, fencing stolen goods, or an array of other illegal personal services.
15	<b>ASSASSINATION:</b> Killers for hire. Contracts are often through agents and intermediaries.
16	<b>DRUG DEALING:</b> Dealing with various illegal and addictive substances. May include magical or alchemical drugs.
17	<b>ARMS DEALING:</b> Selling illegal weapons, including arms and armor banned or restricted only to certain individuals. This includes magic or other exceptionally rare and dangerous weapons in many cases.
18	<b>ORGANIZED CRIME:</b> Multiple criminal enterprises in one. Roll 1d3+1 more times on this table to determine everything this organization is involved in. If one of those rolls results in another 18, this is a cartel, perpetrating most of the crimes listed here and probably several that aren't.

## FORCING FRIENDSHIP

You can't force the PCs to like your character, and since the players have agency in the actions of their characters, sometimes they're just not going to have any interest in a character you thought would become a major story element. This is okay. You can take all the great ideas you had for the character and save them for another character later.

## NPC AS REWARDS

It's entirely possible an NPC might join the party for a length of time as the result of an adventure. But the promise of a long-term addition to the party should not be the PCs' only motivation. It's totally reasonable for a powerful mage to insist the heroes perform some task for him before he'll help them with their we-need-a-powerful-mage problem, but this doesn't mean they own him and can wield him like a weapon. Within the context of the story, the mage still has his own agency and can refuse to do something if it goes against his character, or he could die before ever having fulfilled his obligation. Players shouldn't feel like entire adventures were wasted if they lose an ally who came out of those adventures.

### ADVERSARY EXAMPLES

## MASTER & MINION

William wants to design two adversaries for his campaign—a powerful mastermind and a less potent but still competent henchman. He takes different approaches in designing each of them, which you can follow along with.

## GETHSEMANE, HALF-DEMON WARRIOR MASTERMIND

Inspiration for a great character can come from anywhere. Movies, art, comics, even music can provide an imaginary springboard for a foe. In this case, William sees the bottom of page 46 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and decides to design the demonic woman with black wings and a wicked sword as a villain.

### THE IDEA

It's tempting to base her on the soldier demon from the **Adversaries** chapter of the *Basic Rulebook*, and he'll end up taking some inspiration from there, but he starts building her as a by-the-book warrior since he wants her to be a character who corresponds directly to player characters of similar level and ability, not just a monster. He makes her level 15, because he wants her to be a long-term adversary and a good bit tougher than the PCs. He's already named her Gethsemane because he heard it somewhere and it sounded cool, but he decides her nickname is "Gitsie," because a demon with a cute nickname seems like it could make for a good background story. While he's skimming the **Adversaries** chapter, he notices the **Special Powers** section on page 114 already defines "winged." Now he's got a quick jumble of ideas, so he gets them all written down before he forgets.

## Initial Character Ideas

Name: Gethsemane "Gitsie"  
Role: Mastermind  
Race: Demon/Elf mix  
Gethsemane, Level 15 Warrior

### Special Qualities

Powers: Winged  
Equipment: Dagger, Flaming Sword, Shield

William kept a copy of her picture handy while writing up his notes, which helped put placeholders for her weapons and equipment. He decided on "demon/elf mix" because she has a very human physique and elflike ears.

## ANCESTRY & ORIGINS

After getting these starting ideas written down, he gets back to designing a level 15 warrior. He knows she's an elf, and since there aren't any rules for PC demons, he decides elf is her dominant race. This gives her +1 Dexterity, Dark Sight, and a base Speed of 12. He picks Perception (Seeing) for her focus. From the **Elf Benefits** table, he gives her Dexterity (Initiative), because it's a good thing for a villain to have. This leaves her needing one benefit from her other race—but there is no **Demon Benefits** table, so he picks +1 Fighting from the **Orc Benefits** table instead.

## BACKGROUNDS

Next up are backgrounds. William hasn't given a ton of thought to this yet, but it's hard to imagine an elf who looks like a demon being anything but an Outsider. Then again, what if her demon traits didn't appear until she was older? He's not sure, so he rolls a d6 on the Social Class table and gets a 3 for Lower Class. The tinge of disappointment he feels tells him he'd rather have her be Upper Class, which he picks because he doesn't have to strictly follow the character creation rules when making an NPC. He makes her a noble, as it sounds like a great scandal. Finally, he gives her Communication (Leadership) from her background, because it goes well with a mastermind.

## BASIC CLASS QUALITIES

He writes down the level 1 warrior stats, selecting Weapon and Shield Style and Dual Weapon Style based on her picture. While doing this, he realizes he needs to pick Weapon Groups, so he picks Heavy Blades and Light Blades—again based on her picture—and Black Powder, because a gun-toting demon sounds fantastic.

## ABILITIES

William skipped over starting abilities, because he's going to do all fifteen levels of them in a big chunk right now. A PC doing point-buy would start each ability at 0 and get ten advancements. However, he's making a level 15 character, so



he gets another seven advancements to distribute to primary abilities and seven to distribute to secondary, plus a matching set of primary and secondary focuses.

Gethsemane is primarily a melee fighter and she looks muscular, so William makes sure to put a lot into Fighting and Strength, but he doesn't neglect Accuracy since she's got the dagger and he also wants to give her guns. He avoids the temptation to throw too many advancements into Constitution just for the sake of Health. She's a mastermind, so he makes sure she's got a decent Communication. He's tempted to give her a high Willpower, because it could be cool to give her some magical ability, but a low Willpower fits with the idea that her demon side is overtaking her elf side. Also, a demon who doesn't use magic sounds more interesting than one who does.

William makes sure to give her a good balance of focuses to make her interesting in a fight, to support her role as a mastermind, and to support her background as a young noble. He also remembers where he heard the name Gethsemane and decides themes of betrayal should play a big part in her background, so he gives her Communication (Deception).

## Gethsemane, Level 15 Warrior

### Abilities (Focuses)

Accuracy 4 (Light Blades, Black Powder)  
Communication 4 (Deception, Etiquette, Leadership)  
Constitution 1 (Drinking, Stamina)  
Dexterity 3 (Acrobatics, Calligraphy, Initiative)  
Fighting 6 (Heavy Blades)  
Intelligence 1 (Heraldry, Historical Lore)  
Perception 1 (Seeing)  
Strength 5 (Intimidation, Jumping)  
Willpower 0 (Courage)  
Speed: 15 Health: ?? Defense: 13 Armor Rating: ??  
Weapons: Dagger, Flaming Sword, Guns, Tail

### Special Qualities

Favored Stunts: ??  
Powers: Dark Sight, Demon Magic Defense, Winged  
Demon Magic Defense: Not quite so easy to get spells off on her.  
Weapon Groups: Black Powder, Brawling, Heavy Blades, Light Blades  
Talents: Armor Training (Novice), Dual Weapon Style (Novice), Weapon and Shield Style (Novice)  
Equipment: Dagger, Flaming Sword, Shield  
Notes: Didn't always look like a demon, themes of betrayal

While giving her a 0 in Willpower, William realized this would make her extremely susceptible to magic, so he made up "demon magic defense" as a power to fill in later.

## TALENTS & SPECIALIZATIONS

He now picks out talents and specializations. Again, he's going to do these all at once instead of one level at a time. At level 15, this means one Master specialization, one Journeyman specialization, and seven talent degrees.

Berserker is the only specialization he likes, but it requires a Willpower of 2. However, William reminds himself he doesn't always have to follow the rules when creating NPCs, so he makes her a Berserker and trades the two degrees of a second specialization for more talent degrees.

With nine degrees worth of talents to choose, William continues to take inspiration from the artwork. He forgoes increasing her Armor Training, but writes down a reminder to give her an Armor Rating boost for her Demon Hide. He maxes out Dual Weapon Style and Weapon and Shield Style and uses the remaining five degrees for noncombat talents. He wants her to be a good leader, so he maxes out Command and gives her one degree of Intrigue, because it works with her background and being able to re-roll Communication (Deception) tests sounds handy. Looking over the remaining talent options, Music seems like it could add something interesting to her personality, but she needs Communication (Performance) or Intelligence (Musical Lore), neither of which she has. William decides to swap Intelligence (Historical Lore) for Intelligence (Musical Lore).

William writes down any other class-based bonuses he's overlooked, selecting Intelligence (Military Lore) at level 2 and the Axes, Bludgeons, and Spears weapon groups at levels 4, 8, and 13.

## SPECIAL QUALITIES & EQUIPMENT

Normally he'd go to equipment next, but since he's made up a few powers for her already, William looks at the end of the **Adversaries** chapter of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* to see if there's anything else he'd like to apply. Armored and Magic Resistance sound very much like the Demon Hide and Demon Magic Defense he came up with, so he swaps out those ideas for the existing powers. Shadow is an interesting option, because it makes her harder to defeat in some circumstances and easier in others. This sort of thing works great for a mastermind, because it means she can be nearly impossible to kill in earlier encounters until the PCs discover her weakness and find ways to exploit it.

Taking one more look at the artwork before writing up her equipment, William notices she's got fangs, so he gives her a bite attack. He skips the normal equipment rules for character creation and just picks her gear based on the art. He gives her heavy leather armor and a medium shield, and he decides her sword probably falls into the long sword category. He also gives her a pair of pistols. He writes down the base stats for all of those with the intention of applying some magical properties later. He also needs statistics for her bite and tail, so he repurposes the Bite and Claw attacks from the soldier demon in the *Basic Rulebook*. These use specific focuses Gethsemane doesn't have, but she prefers to fight with her weapons anyway, which inspires William to reduce the damage of her Bite attack by 1d6. He likes the idea of giving her a bonus attack with her tail or even her wings when she's flanked, so he jots this idea down.

## GETHSEMANE, LEVEL 15 WARRIOR

### ABILITIES (FOCUSES)

4	ACCURACY (LIGHT BLADES, BLACK POWDER)
4	COMMUNICATION (DECEPTION, ETIQUETTE, LEADERSHIP)
1	CONSTITUTION (DRINKING, STAMINA)
3	DEXTERITY (ACROBATICS, CALLIGRAPHY, INITIATIVE)
6	FIGHTING (HEAVY BLADES)
1	INTELLIGENCE (HERALDRY, MILITARY LORE, MUSICAL LORE)
1	PERCEPTION (SEEING)
5	STRENGTH (INTIMIDATION, JUMPING)
0	WILLPOWER (COURAGE)

### SPEED HEALTH DEFENSE ARMOR RATING

15 (FLYING 18) 115 13 (17 WITH THE DARKNESS) 6

### WEAPON ATTACK ROLL DAMAGE

BITE	+4	1D6+5
DAGGER	+6	1D6+8
FIERY VENGEANCE	+10	2D6+9
RED LEFT/RIGHT HAND	+6	1D6+7
TAIL STRIKE	+6	1D6+6
WING STRIKE	+6	1D6+6

### SPECIAL QUALITIES

**FAVORED STUNTS:** Counter-Flank (1+ SP), Defensive Stance (1 SP with shield), Dual Strike (3 SP), Kaboom! (1 SP with ignited *Fiery Vengeance*), Lethal Blow (4 SP while Berserk), Lightning Attack (2 SP with secondary weapon), Regenerate (2+ SP in shadows), Threaten (1 SP)

**POWERS:** Armored, Dark Sight, Expert Strike, Magic Resistance, Quick Strike, Shadow, Veteran, Winged

**ARMORED:** Due to her unnatural demon skin, her Armor Rating is increased by 2.

**BLENDING (SHADOW):** The character can blend into her surroundings. This gives her a +2 bonus to any Dexterity (Stealth) checks based on hiding or avoiding being seen.

**COUNTER-FLANK:** As a 1 SP stunt, the character can make an additional attack against an adjacent character she has not otherwise attacked this round. This additional attack can be a tail strike or wing strike and cannot generate stunt points. This stunt may be performed twice in one turn (one tail strike and one wing strike) as long as each attack has a different target.

**THE DARKNESS:** *The Darkness* was crafted by a demon smith who flayed herself for its leather and cured it in her own marrow. This medium shield is so unnaturally black it looks like a hole in the universe itself. This effect is distracting to anyone making an attack against the wielder, granting an additional +2 Defense.

**FIERY VENGEANCE:** This evil blade was carved whole from the femur of an ancient demon lord. It is impervious to all known methods of damage, and the means by which it was originally carved have long been lost to time. Its fine heft, balance, and perfect sharpness grant a wielder a +2 bonus

on attack rolls and a +2 bonus on damage rolled with the weapon. A demonic character can set *Fiery Vengeance* aflame using an Activate action and can extinguish it with an Activate action as well. When aflame, the sword does an extra 1d6 + Willpower damage, allows the wielder to perform the Kaboom! stunt for 1 SP, and may ignite other flammable items it touches. Additionally, a character with latent demonic traits will have those traits come immediately and fully to the forefront from contact with this weapon, either by wielding it or being damaged by it. This is a permanent change and cannot be remedied by any known means.

**INTRIGUE:** If you fail a Communication (Deception) test, you can re-roll it, but you must keep the result of the second roll.

**MAGIC RESISTANCE:** The character gains a +3 bonus to resist spells or other magical effects.

**RED RIGHT HAND/RED LEFT HAND:** These twin flame-red pistols appear identical to the casual observer. Telling them apart requires a successful TN 13 Perception (Seeing) or Intelligence (Arcane Lore) test. A character not specifically looking for differences suffers a -3 penalty to this test. When wielded together in the correct hands, their damage counts as magical, and they do not require reloading if they were loaded before firing. If a character successfully hits with both weapons in a single turn (for example, via Quick Strike or Lightning Attack), each target hit this turn suffers an additional 1d6 penetrating damage. Therefore, hitting the same target twice only does 1d6 extra penetrating damage, but hitting five targets by combining Dual Weapon Style, Quick Strike, Lightning Attack, and Dual Strike would do an extra 1d6 penetrating damage to all five targets. When wielded separately or in the wrong hands, these are completely ordinary pistols, firing completely ordinary bullets with no special properties. Gethsemane keeps these in dual rear holsters so she does not have to remember which is which.

**REGENERATE (SHADOW):** The character's flesh knits itself back together even as you endeavor to slay it. she can regain 2 Health as a 2 SP stunt. This stunt may be used multiple times in the same roll if enough SP are available, increasing the healing effect. Wounds from light-based magical attacks cannot be healed with Regenerate.

**SHADOW:** The character is attuned to the mystical realms of darkness and shadow. She takes half damage from all non-magical attacks and can use the Regenerate and Blending powers in darkness or dim light. In sunlight or other bright light, she takes damage normally and all light-based magical attacks do an extra 1d6 penetrating damage to her.

**WINGED:** The character gains flying movement and can use flying actions.

**WEAPON GROUPS:** Axes, Black Powder, Bludgeons, Brawling, Heavy Blades, Light Blades, Spears

**SPECIALIZATION:** Berserker (Master)

**TALENTS:** Armor Training (Novice), Command (Master), Dual Weapon Style (Master), Intrigue (Novice), Music (Novice), Weapon and Shield Style (Master)

**EQUIPMENT:** Dagger, *The Darkness*, *Fiery Vengeance*, Heavy Leather Armor, *Red Left Hand*, *Red Right Hand*, Violin

THREAT: DIRE



See the **Building Rewards** chapter of this book for more detail on designing special items, but William takes inspiration from the Thunder Axe in the **Rewards** chapter of the *Basic Rulebook* to design *Fiery Vengeance*. While he's there, he applies interesting effects to Gethsemane's guns and shield as well.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

This finally gets William a nearly complete stat block for Gethsemane. He makes sure to apply bonuses from Veteran and writes out the details of her other powers. He also decides her musical instrument is a violin and her family name is Andorel. Finally, rather than rolling 16d6 and figuring out what her Constitution would have been at each level, he uses an average die result of 3.5 plus 2 for her Constitution per level and adds it to the 30 she starts with as a Warrior to determine her Health. The total is 112.5, which he rounds up to 115.

### GETHSEMANE "GITSIE" ANDOREL

**ROLE:** Mastermind

**RACE:** Demon/Elf mix

**BACKGROUND:** Upper Class Noble

Gethsemane is the product of her noble mother's dalliance with an incubus. When she was born and through her childhood, she looked entirely like an elf, so while her mother knew little Gitsie's father was a demon, she never found it necessary to tell anyone, including her husband. On her twentieth birthday, Gethsemane received an anonymous gift in the form of a black sword and shield. When she touched the sword, her demon side emerged, filling her with a violent rage she never before knew. For a time, she managed to keep this anger in check, and her household attempted to keep her hidden from the outside world. But it was all too much for her father, who murdered her mother for her infidelity and would have slain Gethsemane had she not knocked one of the wicked pistols from his hands and turned it against him. She quietly liquidated her family's assets, keeping only the weapons gained from her two fathers and the violin on which her mother had trained her. She used this fortune to gather allies against a world that rejected her for her parentage, wishing nothing more than to live up to the demonic visage she now bears.

## FINISHING TOUCHES

William made a few tweaks while applying Gethsemane's special qualities. First, he chose light-based magic as the type not healed by Regeneration. Second, the Armor Rating usually granted by Magic Resistance got very complicated when factoring in her normal Armor Rating of 6 and vulnerability to light-based magic, so he just dropped the Armor Rating part of Magic Resistance and upped the resistance to +3. Finally, he decided to give her a slight speed advantage while flying.

He also noticed while building out her pistols that she could potentially get five attacks in a single turn when dual-wielding, or *seven* if she somehow gets 7 SP and pulls off two Counter-Flank stunts. This works great when she's holding herself in a fight against an entire party of PCs and allies.

## CYNDARTH, BARBARIAN WARRIOR-MAGE HENCHMAN

William wants to create an interesting henchman for Gethsemene. He also has a character he'd like to breathe new life into from the *Dragon Age* campaign he played in. In the sidebar are Cyndarth's original *Dragon Age* stats. You can learn more about how they work in the *Dragon Age Core Rulebook*. Those unfamiliar with *Dragon Age* should note these statistics are similar in scale and general design to *Fantasy AGE*, but also that some abilities are very different. Remember, the goal here is not a perfect point-for-point conversion between the two systems, but using an existing character in another game to create a useful and interesting character in *Fantasy AGE*.

### Dragon Age Source Character

Name: Cyndarth  
Race: Human  
Background: Chasind Apostate

Cyndarth grew up in Dosov Village, a small Chasind settlement in the Korcari Wilds. His mother, Baba Zorya, was the village's leader. When a strange new plague, thought to be tied to the darkspawn taint, began spreading through the Wilds and sending Chasind into mindless rages, Cyndarth was the only member of his village to escape. He follows his people's traditions of dressing only in a loincloth and hand and foot wrappings. To avoid being spotted as an apostate, he will usually only cast spells in front of people if he can make it look like the magic is coming from his sword rather than from himself.

### CONVERTING ABILITIES

William's first task is to get rid of Cyndarth's Cunning and Magic abilities (legacies of the *Dragon Age* version of AGE) and add Accuracy, Fighting, and Intelligence. He decides to go the easy route and get Accuracy from Dexterity, Fighting from Strength, and Intelligence from Magic. Getting Intelligence from Cunning would have made sense for a rogue or warrior, but spellcasting is based on Intelligence in *Fantasy AGE*, so Magic is a better corresponding ability for a mage. William also boosts Willpower at the expense of Constitution and Dexterity so Cyndarth's overall magical ability is on par with his *Dragon Age* equivalent.

### CHANGING FOCUSES & SPECIAL QUALITIES

Next, he checks which focuses need to change and finds that only Primal and Spirit need replacements. Knowing he's going to have a lot of changes to make for magic, he pauses this process in favor of talents and a specialization. Arcane Warrior easily becomes Sword Mage, Chirurgy goes unchanged, and Primal Magic goes away entirely. Additionally, Arcane Lance becomes Arcane Blast and Spell Lance becomes Spell Blast, which just leaves spells and one nonmagic talent to deal with.

CYNDARTH			
LEVEL 6 MAGE			
ABILITIES (FOCUSES)			
0	COMMUNICATION		
4	CONSTITUTION		
2	CUNNING (HEALING, NATURAL LORE)		
4	DEXTERITY (ACROBATICS, LIGHT BLADES)		
5	MAGIC (PRIMAL, SPIRIT)		
0	PERCEPTION		
-1	STRENGTH		
3	WILLPOWER (SELF-DISCIPLINE)		
SPEED	HEALTH	DEFENSE	ARMOR RATING
14	52	14	0 (5 WITH ROCK ARMOR)
WEAPON		ATTACK ROLL	DAMAGE
ARCANE LANCE		+5	1D6+5
GAUNTLETS		+4	1D3
SHORT SWORD		+6	1D6+1
SPECIAL QUALITIES			
<b>SPELLPOWER:</b> 15 (17) <b>MANA:</b> 58			
<b>SPELLS:</b> <i>aura of might, frost weapons, invigorate, mana drain, rock armor, wind weaving, winter's grasp</i>			
<b>FAVORED STUNTS:</b> Spell Lance (3 SP)			
<b>SPECIALIZATION:</b> Arcane Warrior (Novice)			
<b>TALENTS:</b> Chirurgy (Journeyman), Primal Magic (Journeyman)			
<b>WEAPON GROUPS:</b> Brawling, Light Blades, Staves			
<b>EQUIPMENT:</b> Boots, Gauntlets (leather hand-wraps), Loin Cloth, Short Sword			
THREAT: MAJOR			

### SPELLS & MAGIC

William sees two options for spells. Either he could convert the *Dragon Age* spells to *Fantasy AGE* or he could replace them with *Fantasy AGE* spells. Because NPCs do not have to follow the same spell progression and rules as PCs, he decides to do a little of both. *Aura of might* becomes *hero's might*, *invigorate* becomes *hero's spirit*, *rock armor* becomes *stone cloak*, *wind weaving* becomes *wind blast*, and *winter's grasp* becomes *watery doom*. *Frost weapons* is found in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*, but *mana drain* doesn't have an exact *Fantasy AGE* corollary. Upon perusing the Death Arcana in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*, William decides *draw upon death* is an interesting counterpart, suggesting a dark edge to the tribal magic Cyndarth utilizes.

These spells all come from wildly different arcana, but as an NPC Cyndarth doesn't need to follow PC-oriented rules for character generation. This means he gains a variety of spells across multiple arcana more easily than other characters, but he lacks any advantages of the arcana talents, such as reduced stunt costs.

At level 6, a mage would normally have four degrees of magic talents, but since Cyndarth isn't using a normal spell progression, William decides to simply give him the Heroic and Water Arcana focuses to match his highest-powered spells. William also makes a note to play up Cyndarth's "hedge magic" as having breadth but lacking depth compared to PCs wielding focused arcana talents during play—this helps prevent PC spellcasters from feeling NPCs are "special" in ways that overshadow them.

### CYNDARTH

**ROLE:** Henchman  
**RACE:** Human  
**BACKGROUND:** Outsider Exile



Cyndarth grew up in Dosov Village, a small barbarian settlement in the swamplands. His mother, Baba Zorya, was the village's leader. When a strange new plague began spreading through the swamps, sending barbarians into mindless rages, he was the only member of his village to escape, though the rage still has a loose grip on him. He follows his people's traditions of dressing only in a loincloth and hand and foot wrappings. He prefers to hide his magic ability and will usually only cast spells in front of people if he can make it look like the magic is coming from his sword rather than from himself. This can trick foes into focusing on disarming him, which only causes him to unleash his magic on them more furiously, seeing no further reason to hide his power. With no family left, he now fights for money. While he will enthusiastically engage in dishonorable deeds for pay, he will not dishonor his mercenary profession by disengaging from an assignment to favor a better offer.

### CYNDARTH, HUMAN MAGE

#### ABILITIES (FOCUSES)

4	ACCURACY (LIGHT BLADES)
0	COMMUNICATION
3	CONSTITUTION
3	DEXTERITY (ACROBATICS)
-1	FIGHTING
5	INTELLIGENCE (HEALING, HEROIC ARCANA, NATURAL LORE, WATER ARCANA)
0	PERCEPTION
-1	STRENGTH
5	WILLPOWER (SELF-DISCIPLINE)

SPEED	HEALTH	DEFENSE	ARMOR RATING
13	46	13	0

WEAPON	ATTACK ROLL	DAMAGE
ARCANE BLAST	+5	1d6+5
GAUNTLETS	+4	1d3+6
SHORT SWORD	+6	1d6+7

#### SPECIAL QUALITIES

**SPELLPOWER:** 15 (17) **MANA:** 58

**FAVORED STUNTS:** Lightning Casting (3 SP), Spell Blast (3 SP)

**LIGHTNING CASTING:** As a 3 SP stunt, you may cast a spell after a successful attack. The spell must have a casting time of a major action or a minor action. If you roll doubles on this casting roll, you do not get any more stunt points. If the original attack was made with a weapon, the spell appears to emanate from the weapon rather than from the caster.

**TALENTS:** Chirurgy (Journeyman)

**WEAPON GROUPS:** Brawling, Light Blades, Staves

**SPECIALIZATION:** Sword Mage (Journeyman)

**SPELLS:** *draw upon death, frost weapons, hero's might, hero's spirit, stone cloak, watery doom, wind blast*

**EQUIPMENT:** Boots, Gauntlets (leather hand-wraps), Loin Cloth, Short Sword

**THREAT: MODERATE**



## BUILDING REWARDS

The Rewards chapter of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* describes the various benefits characters earn from their adventures, from leveling up and achieving goals to gaining reputation, wealth, and magical treasures. This chapter looks at ways to combine and use all of those various rewards and others in the context of your campaign.

### USING REWARDS

Rewards serve two primary purposes in a *Fantasy AGE* campaign: milestones and supplementary character abilities. Rewards create goals for characters to reach toward, and they provide a sense of achievement for things the characters have done to that point. An adventurer may strive toward a particular achievement and the rewards that come with it, while a hero with a sterling reputation and the high-level abilities to back it up has clearly accomplished a great deal. This means, in terms of the overall campaign, rewards can be seen as “milestones” throughout the course of the story.

Rewards also have tangible in-game benefits, ranging from bonuses on certain tests to bonus stunts or entirely new powers, outside of the progression of class powers provided by level advancement. Even honorifics and titles grant certain benefits, making these rewards something with a lasting impact on the game after characters gain them. This is particularly true for things like companions and magic items.

### REWARD MAPPING

The role of rewards as milestones means you can map out the various rewards for your *Fantasy AGE* game. This not only allows you to get a sense for how they will stack up as things progress, but you can also compare the characters’ progress later on and give the players goals to strive toward. The “grid” of the map is the campaign’s level progression, which is a known reward ranging from level 1 to level 20—or whatever range you plan for the campaign, if you’re starting at a higher level or plan on ending at a lower one. We can further break this grid down into the broader Threat levels given in the **Adversaries** chapter of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, looking at them as “achievement levels” instead:

#### CHARACTER ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS

CHARACTER LEVEL	ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL
1–4	Beginner
5–8	Adept
9–12	Expert
13–17	Master
18–20	Legendary

We can note some of the important rewards that happen in relation to the characters’ level, which are milestones of their own on this map:

- **SPECIALIZATION:** Characters gain their first specialization for their class at the end of beginner (level 4), marking their progression into adept. By the time they reach the end of adept (level 8), characters can have reached the master degree of their specialization, ready to head into expert.
- **MASTERY:** Level 12 is significant for both rogues and warriors: Rogues gain their Slippery power at that level, while warriors gain their Veteran power. These leveling milestones can further mark the passage from expertise into real mastery at level 13. Mages can start their second specialization by level 12, also representing a level of mastery.
- **EPIC:** Every class has an epic power at level 20, and all of them have significant powers they acquire during the legendary levels starting at level 18.

These five achievement levels offer ways to break down different levels of rewards to ensure a more even distribution and to provide milestones for when characters should be acquiring certain rewards. For example, an honorific or title indicative of true expertise is probably not suitable until around level 9, when the character has achieved the expert level.



## REWARDS AS GOALS

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Earning a particular reward or rewards can be a part of a character's goals, either right from the start of the campaign or as the story progresses and the character becomes aware of the opportunity represented by the reward. For a reward to function as a goal, it must be known to the character as at least a possibility, whether anyone else is aware of it or believes in it or not. This may include achieving membership in an exclusive organization, perhaps as a stepping-stone toward attaining a specialization, earning a particular title or honorific, or questing to find or obtain a particular magic item or piece of treasure, especially if it is connected with the character's background in some fashion. The reward offers a tangible result for the achievement of the character's goal and can lead to the creation of new goals, such as advancement within an organization or unlocking greater powers or secrets of a magical artifact (see **Magic Items**).

## REWARDS AS ACHIEVEMENTS

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Rewards reflect things characters have achieved in their careers and can serve as important reminders of how far they have come. This can be as simple as rewards for goals the character has previously achieved or unexpected rewards as reminders of how a hero has grown, developed, and changed over time. Honorifics are some of the clearest achievements, since they tend to be awarded for past deeds and describe what the character has done, but membership also serves as an achievement, especially once the character has advanced beyond the recruit level toward leadership within the organization. The same is the case for titles, which are in part recognition of the character's achievements.

## REWARDS AS RESOURCES

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Rewards in *Fantasy AGE* are not just things for characters to strive toward and recall fondly. They affect a character's abilities, offering different benefits and options. This is especially true of magic items, but most rewards offer some form of a game benefit. Because of this mechanical benefit, rewards should be considered carefully and not handed out on a whim, since they can have effects as important as (if not more so than) the straightforward reward of gaining levels and the class powers associated with those levels.

Unlike the benefits of gaining levels, however, some rewards are temporary or expendable resources. Characters gain wealth, for example, which they can spend or lose, and they likewise acquire temporary magic items, which are used up in the course of their later adventures. Even more lasting rewards like memberships, honorifics, or companions might be taken away or lost if the character's relationships change: membership can be revoked, honorifics may be stripped away, and companions might perish or leave. Simi-

larly, permanent magic items or treasures might be stolen or even destroyed.

The Game Master should also consider the possible ebb and flow of character rewards in the context of the campaign. You can, for example, plan out a particular point in the campaign where characters lose some or even all of the rewards they've gained other than their level, forcing them to rely on fewer resources. A party of adventurers might be defamed, for example, stripped of their achievements and forced into exile, or they could witness the destruction of the city or nation they called home, losing many of the rewards tied to that place in the process.

Characters can also be temporarily denied access to certain resources from rewards. A hero with a sterling reputation, a personal estate, an important title, and many servants in a particular place is in a quite different position from the same character trapped in an underground realm of strange creatures who care nothing about the adventurer's far-away achievements. A GM is free to adjust access to rewards and their benefits as suits the conditions of the adventure and the overall story.

## UNLOCKING REWARDS

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Exactly how characters achieve certain rewards depends on the reward and the requirements set by the GM. You can even vary the requirements needed to “unlock” or access the reward as suits the campaign and the characters' progress. Some achievements simply happen based on events in the unfolding story of the campaign, such as a gain in wealth upon finding some lost treasure. Others require additional effort to acquire, or they might involve gaining permission or assistance from an outside agency. There are several ways you can handle unlocking rewards in the *Fantasy AGE* system.

## ATTUNEMENT

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The *Fantasy AGE Companion* introduces the idea of attunement for artifacts, wherein it takes time for a powerful magic item to give a new wielder full access to its benefits. A Game Master could extend this to some or all permanent magic items in the campaign, establishing a system wherein characters need a certain amount of time, effort, or both to attune themselves to an item in order to use it or to use certain benefits. This means adventurers can't simply grab an item from a treasure trove and wield it immediately. It also imposes a certain amount of downtime between encounters or adventures so characters can perform attunements, which can take anywhere from minutes to days, or perhaps even as long as a month or lunar cycle. Attunement may be automatic and take nothing more than the allotted time, or it could involve other elements such as certain rituals, material components (with an associated cost), or even an advanced ability test—see **Advanced Tests** in **CHAPTER 8** of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*.

## BESTOWAL

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Many rewards are bestowed upon characters directly. This is common for honorifics (particularly titles), membership, and

companions, but magic items and wealth can also be granted in this manner. At times, these bestowed rewards also come with certain restrictions and conditions, such as vows or legal obligations.

Rewards are most often bestowed by mortal agencies, typically nobles, rulers, or higher-ups in organizations. Other ruling bodies or governments might also bestow rewards. These tend to be honorifics and membership, although other rewards are possible. Supernatural forces might also bestow rewards in some *Fantasy AGE* campaigns, ranging from enigmatic wizards to creatures such as dragons or spirits, or even divine beings like deities or their emissaries. These entities tend to bestow magic items, wealth, or companions, although they may also grant honorifics, particularly in the form of blessings. How better to become Protected by Destiny, for example, than to be the “chosen one” of a goddess?

The key element of a bestowed reward is that even once earned, it may be withheld or revoked by the bestowing party. Such retraction might range from a sovereign stripping a knight or noble of their title to a divinity rescinding its blessings. It is largely up to the Game Master what rewards, if any, can be taken back from characters, and under what circumstances. It is not something you should do often, but sometimes the story and the character's actions warrant it.

## TRAINING

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Some rewards require additional investments of time and effort on the part of characters to achieve. The most common of these is attainment of a new level, which can require training to take effect and grant characters the new class powers and other benefits that come with it. Things like membership may also require training, depending on the demands of the organization, and the same goes for bestowed titles—especially if those titles are associated with certain duties or responsibilities. Training may also be associated with specific milestones of character achievement, such as the transition between achievement levels (going from beginner to adept, for example) or the acquisition of abilities like specializations.

Training involves two factors: time and resources. The time required is usually such that training can occur only in the downtime between adventures, although the GM may make exceptions for long interludes between encounters in an adventure. The exact time required is up to the Game Master to decide, since the key point is fitting in training time between adventures or chapters in the overall campaign. It might be a matter of a day or two, or it might take weeks.

Resources reflect what the character needs to complete the training other than time. This usually involves instruction, either from written works like books or scrolls or through access to a teacher. In some cases, finding a suitable teacher may be a reward unto itself, and this is something the GM should take into account when mapping out the rewards for the campaign. Of course, there's no guarantee a particular teacher will accept a character as a pupil, and many teachers expect some kind of recompense or payment. Training resources may also include necessary materials or special facilities. As with attunement, the GM may also choose to require an ability test or advanced test to successfully complete the training or to determine how long the training takes.



## CREATING REWARDS

Game Masters should create suitable rewards for characters in a *Fantasy AGE* campaign, choosing from resources in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and *Fantasy AGE Companion*. This section looks at some guidelines to keep in mind when creating different types of rewards.

Generally speaking, while there should be a diverse range of different rewards available for characters, it is not necessary for the same rewards, or even the same types of rewards, to be available to every character. For example, you do not necessarily need organizations capable of offering suitable membership rewards to every character. While it's wise to ensure you meet expectations, don't create an overabundance of rewards, especially ones that don't suit the characters or their goals. Use your reward mapping to get a sense of the kinds of rewards you'll need in advance. If something unexpected comes up, you can always create some additional rewards to fit.

Also take into account player input when creating and assigning rewards over the course of your campaign. You may want to start players off with clear-cut awards you assign at the end of each adventure. As the players gain experience and their characters become better-rounded, get more player input as to suitable rewards. The players may have ideas or goals you haven't considered, or they might have become attached to some element of an adventure they'd like to see turned into a reward, such as a new NPC as a companion or a suitable honorific based on one of their character's deeds. Cultivating player input helps the rewards feel more personal and satisfying, since they had a hand in choosing them.

## HONORIFICS

As detailed in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*, honorifics are special titles, epithets, or the like awarded to characters based on their actions and achievements. In particular, honorifics given as rewards have specific game benefits associated with them; they are more than just window dressing. Honorifics are bestowed upon characters by higher authorities, ranging from nobility and royalty to higher-ups within organizations (see **Membership**) or even by divine or supernatural powers. Other honorifics are spontaneously bestowed based on stories of a character's renown. For example, a hero who overcomes the dread goblin horde of the Iron Mountains may become known as "Horde-Breaker" or "Goblin-Slayer," while the mage who trapped and banished the Duke of the Frozen Hell may be "Binder of Devils" – to name just a few examples.

## TITLES

Titles are typically granted and include such things as nobility (in settings featuring it) as well as knighthoods and specific job titles, such as being named advisor to the throne or royal wizard, for example. Some titles come with responsibilities as well as benefits, and noble or job titles often come with a measure of income or resources (see **Wealth and Treasure**). Becoming a landed knight, for example, includes an estate and the income from it, but it also requires the character to oversee and manage that estate, or to at least appoint someone to do so while the landlord is off adventuring.

Some titles are inherited, owed to a character by virtue of birth and familial relationship. The Game Master can handle these titles much like levels of membership (see **Membership** in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*). As the campaign progresses and the character increases in level, they may come into their full inheritance. The young heir to the throne might attain knighthood at the adept achievement level, eventually succeeding to the crown at the master or legendary level. The title is "foreordained," but it still takes time to come to pass in the campaign.

## HONORIFIC BENEFITS

Most honorifics provide a bonus to certain types of ability tests, usually related to a specific focus and situation, such as Willpower (Courage) tests to resist fear and intimidation from a particular type of creature, Perception (Tracking) tests to follow a certain quarry, and similar benefits. Generally, the broader the situation the lower the bonus, while the narrower the circumstances the higher it can be: +1 for a fairly broad bonus like all social tests with a common group or all tests with one or two focuses in a common environment; +2 for fairly common tests limited to a specific group or situation, like resisting undead or tracking goblins. In a few cases, an honorific might grant a +3 bonus for a quite specific situation, such as with people from a particular extended family or in a specific type of location.

Rather than a bonus, some honorifics may impose or negate a penalty instead, either applying a penalty to the character's opponents, such as a -1 to Willpower (Morale) tests against a renowned warrior or -3 to Willpower (Courage) tests to conceal their true nature from a true champion of justice. This is useful for abilities reliant upon or affected by opposition. Likewise, honorifics that involve overcoming great hardships or other penalties might bestow the ability to ignore that penalty, or at least reduce it.

As a third option, honorifics can grant some specific benefit associated with their nature, such as how Fortune-Favored allows characters to add 1 to the result of the Stunt Die for matching doubles and generating stunt points, or how Protected by Destiny lets a character avoid death due to damage. The GM should carefully evaluate these benefits, and they are typically only usable once per game session.

## SAMPLE HONORIFICS

The following are some sample honorifics, which you can use in addition to those presented in the *Fantasy AGE Companion* or as examples you can adapt for your own game.

### DRAGON SLAYER

You hunt and battle the most dangerous of foes. When in combat with a dragon (or a related creature, at the Game Master's discretion), you generate 1 additional stunt point whenever you gain stunt points in tests against your foe.

### FEY-FRIEND

You have won the trust of the often isolationist and mysterious fey folk. You gain a +2 bonus on Communication tests to persuade or negotiate with them. You can expect at least a neutral and hospitable welcome from any fey so long as you remain respectful and within the bounds of proper etiquette.



You can use this honorific (along with Warden of the Wilds) as a model to convey similar good standing with other particular societies.

#### GOBLIN-FOE

You are a renowned foe of all goblin-kin—savage humanoid creatures on the borders of civilization. Such creatures take a -2 penalty on Willpower (Morale) tests against you, and you gain a +2 bonus on Perception tests involving goblin-kin because of your knowledge of their ways. Use this honorific (as well as Bane of the Unliving and Dragon Slayer) as a model for similar ones involving specific types of favored enemies.

#### MASTER OF SKILLS

Your reputation for skill and excellence grants you a +1 bonus to Communication tests with the Bargaining, Etiquette, or Persuasion focuses. This bonus increases to +2 against those who share one or more ability focuses with you.

#### OATH KEEPER

Your word is your bond. You have a +3 bonus to Willpower (Self-Discipline) tests to keep a sworn oath or agreement, as well as a +1 bonus to social tests among those who value such fidelity.

#### PROTECTOR OF THE PEOPLE

You are known for standing up for those in need, giving you a +1 bonus to social tests involving those who respect this quality. Also, once per game session, you can interpose your-

self between an attacker and target, so long as the target is within the range of your Speed. You become the target of the attack instead and it is made against you normally, but you gain +2 to your Defense against it.

## MEMBERSHIP

As detailed in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*, membership in different organizations affords characters access to resources, influence, and information based on their rank in the organization. Initially gaining membership (rank 1) is a potential reward, as is advancement within the organization through ranks 2 and 3 (or beyond; see the following).

Creating memberships for your *Fantasy AGE* campaign primarily involves defining what organizations are available for characters to join, along with a sense of what benefits they offer. The range of possible organizations is considerable, but you likely won't need to create more than a handful to suit the needs of a group of characters. Base the available organizations on the heroes as potential members; there's little point in detailing a sect of mystical assassins, for example, if becoming one is not the ambition of any of the player characters. If players have their eyes set on future specializations, however, you may want to take them into account.

## BEYOND RANK 3

It's up to the Game Master whether or not an organization offers advancement beyond Authority Figure (rank 3) and what the benefits of those higher ranks might be. Generally,

they involve greater degrees of influence within the organization's leadership, up to the very summit. The highest available rank corresponds with the leader of the entire organization, either occupied by a single character or by a shared group such as a council. In this latter case, one higher rank might correspond to the leader of that body, if there is one.

### EXAMPLE

*The Game Master decides the leadership of the conspiracy in his campaign known as the Shadow Court is made up of its own "nobility," with shadow-knights as the rank-and-file respected members (rank 2). Above them are coequal shadow-barons and shadow-bishops (rank 3), then shadow-dukes and the shadow-archbishop (rank 4), and finally the coequal shadow-king and shadow-queen (rank 5). Since the Shadow Court isn't ruled by heredity, anyone can potentially move to the highest ranks, given sufficient time and cunning.*

## ORGANIZATION TYPES

The following are some common types of organizations in which *Fantasy AGE* adventurers might seek membership and the benefits they offer.

### GUILD

A guild is a professional organization, a gathering of members of the same profession to regulate their trade, train new professionals, share information and techniques, establish standards, and provide collective bargaining power. There may be guilds for all manner of professions, but the ones most likely to interest player characters are the exotic and dangerous professions, like a Mercenaries' Guild, Thieves' Guild, Mages' Guild, or Assassins' Guild. Some guilds—like the aforementioned Thieves and Assassins—may be illegal in some places, also functioning as secret societies (following). Members can call upon their guild for professional advice, tools of their trade, finding work, or information concerning the guild's trade.

### FIGHTING ORDER

Whether or not a setting involves medieval-style knights and chivalry, military and paramilitary fighting orders tend to be common in most fantasy worlds. Some are sworn to serve a liege-lord or sovereign, while others are mercenary companies working for whomever can meet their prices. Fighting orders often have their own heraldry and symbolism, to better stand out on a chaotic battlefield. Members typically start out as squires or similar apprentices, before becoming full members and progressing up a military chain of command. Members of a fighting order may command a number of troops, and they likely have access to military weapons, armor, other equipment, and places to train and live in their off-duty hours.

### RELIGIOUS ORDER

Many religions establish hierarchies and organizations, either to minister to the needs of the faithful or to serve some need within the body of the religion itself. Indeed, religious communities can have their own parallel guilds, fighting orders, and secret societies involved with the religion and its

faithful. Religious orders not fitting into the other categories tend to either function as a priesthood, tending to the ritual, social, and political needs of the faith, or a cloistered community, focusing primarily on the spiritual needs of the faithful. Still there can be some crossover, and historical cloisters (and their abbots or other leaders) sometimes wielded considerable political power. Members of a religious order can usually find sanctuary among its members, call upon the religion's resources, and make use of libraries and similar stores of knowledge. If the religion wields mystical powers, then these benefits are also available to its members.

### SECRET SOCIETY

Some organizations are kept secret, usually because their purpose is illegal or dangerous. Such societies range from forbidden cults to criminal syndicates to rebel movements against a tyrannical overlord. Other secret societies see themselves as guardians of arcane or even forbidden knowledge. Membership in these groups comes with risks, since simply being a member could be cause for arrest, imprisonment, or execution. Secret societies are also cautious of whom they admit as members for their own security, and they may require various trials or tests of loyalty. Members can call upon a network of secret connections, informants, and resources, but they usually must be discreet in their requests.

### SOCIAL CLUB

The broadest sort of organization is any grouping of individuals with a shared interest or purpose and enough resources to benefit its members. A social club generally operates openly, as opposed to a secret society, but they otherwise can be devoted to any purpose, from exploration to culture and the arts to politics or opportunities for members to meet and network. Some "social clubs" may even be fronts for secret societies or other types of organizations. Members can draw upon their connections for favors, information, or shared resources the club has to offer.

## COMPANIONS

Companions are a new form of reward: non-player characters who owe allegiance and service to a player character. Companions may be recurring characters the heroes connected with in an earlier adventure, or they might be hangers-on, subordinates, or associates the heroes have following along due to their background, group membership, or social standing. They may even be non-humanoid pets or other creatures accompanying the characters.

### EXAMPLE

*After saving a village from an evil cult, the characters gain a companion in the form of Aryss, a girl just into her teens who has lost her family to the cult and wishes to dedicate herself to fighting similar forms of evil, learning from her rescuers. Aryss is quick and clever, and the adventurers are entrusted with showing her the right path so she does not fall prey to her thirst for vengeance rather than seeking justice for those in need.*

## NON-HUMANOID COMPANIONS

Companions do not necessarily need to be people. Fantasy heroes often have animal or creature companions, for example. The concept and game mechanics for an animal companion are essentially the same as for people: The companion has a subset of abilities and focuses and the ability to perform certain useful tasks, along with the natural capabilities of an animal or creature of its type. Non-humanoid companions are assumed to be friendly, cooperative, and capable of carrying out complex tasks as if they benefitted from the journeyman degree of the Animal Training talent (see CHAPTER 3 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*). See the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* for examples of different animals to get a sense for their abilities as companions.

### COMPANIONS IN PLAY

In general, companions are designed to support the party, so be wary of letting them steal the spotlight. It's perfectly acceptable—and sometimes dramatically appropriate—to let the somewhat fussy valet knock out a Shadow Court burglar attempting to steal from the party. However, when it comes time to deal with the shadow-queen and her court, it's best to let your heroes handle the big fight, even if the dice and initiative conspire to have the last hit land on a companion's turn.

Companions are usually detailed by their relevant statistics and some useful tasks they may occasionally automatically perform, either individually or as a group. Companion actions in combat are usually narrated, though they can provide support if necessary. A companion's Health is equal to half that of the player character to whom they are attached, or half that of the character with the second-lowest Health in the case of a companion attached to the group as a whole.

Most companions have a couple of ability scores at 2 and a few more at 1, with two or three focuses. Companions with more focuses and higher abilities are rare, and if Game Masters find that companions need more than this to represent their skills and aptitudes, they should consider giving them full character statistics of their own—but generally, these are not necessary.

#### EXAMPLE

*Aryss is still young and doesn't have much experience, but she has Accuracy 1, Dexterity 2 (Stealth), Intelligence 1, and Perception 2 (Searching). Her Health is 16 (half of the second-lowest character's Health of 32). Perhaps most importantly, she is good at handling logistical matters like setting up camp, dealing with children, and scavenging and finding things (as well as occasionally getting into trouble). The GM can use these abilities to deal with some uninteresting logistics as well as bring plot hooks into play.*

Companions can also help bolster the heroes' advantage during combat or lend weight to the characters' arguments during a roleplaying encounter. An extra person watching the party's backs is almost always welcome. In the midst of a crowded bar fight, a doughty squire might be able to slip outside and ready the heroes' horses to facilitate a quick getaway. A trusted advisor can whisper the right name in the character's ear or procure an invitation to meet with an influential figure.

### COMPANION ADVANCEMENT

While it isn't necessary to draw up a full character sheet for every acquaintance or to keep track of every level of advancement as one would for a player character, as the heroes progress in levels, it might be worth tweaking the companion's stats as well so that one blow from an angry ogre doesn't kill a companion outright in a single unlucky round. The GM should also feel free to occasionally grant a companion character a suitable class power or talent as part of their advancement. Broadly speaking, though, companions should not have abilities greater than roughly half the level of the player character with the second-lowest level.

#### EXAMPLE

*After Aryss has been adventuring with the party for a while, the GM decides the talents of a budding scout and thief suit her, giving Aryss the novice Scouting talent. Though she considers giving her the novice Thievery talent later on, for now she wants to ensure Aryss doesn't outpace or outshine the group's rogue character.*

Following are a few examples of common companions heroes might find sharing their adventures, including their relevant statistics. These can be used as presented, or as examples when designing unique companions for your own group's characters.

#### DOUGHTY SQUIRE

ACCURACY 1 (STAVES), CONSTITUTION 2 (RUNNING),  
FIGHTING 1 (HEAVY BLADES), WILLPOWER 2

A doughty squire can maintain equipment, lead horses, set up camp, run messages, and provide distractions.

#### LOYAL GARDENER

CONSTITUTION 2 (STAMINA), DEXTERITY 1 (CRAFTING),  
STRENGTH 1, WILLPOWER 2 (COURAGE)

A loyal gardener can cook, identify common plants, prepare herbal medicines, and repair common items.

#### INSIGHTFUL COURTIER

COMMUNICATION 2 (ETIQUETTE), INTELLIGENCE 1,  
PERCEPTION 2 (EMPATHY), WILLPOWER 1

An insightful courtier can navigate courtly intrigues, gather rumors and gossip among the upper classes, and advise on matters of manners and high society.

## OLD VETERAN

ACCURACY 1, CONSTITUTION 2 (DRINKING),  
FIGHTING 2, WILLPOWER 1 (MORALE)

An old veteran can recall military history, sweet-talk guards and fellow veterans, and drink most anyone under the table.

## YOUNG ROGUE

ACCURACY 1, DEXTERITY 2 (STEALTH),  
INTELLIGENCE 1, PERCEPTION 2 (SEARCHING)

A young rogue can find lost things and scavenge supplies, entertain and distract children and adults, and sneak around and eavesdrop without drawing attention.

## MAGIC ITEMS

Magic items are some of the most common and expected rewards for fantasy adventurers. CHAPTER 10 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* provides guidelines on creating magic items and including them as rewards, while the *Fantasy AGE Companion* introduces artifacts—more complex magic items able to grow in power as their wielders do.

### ITEM RARITY & ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL

CHAPTER 10 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* describes the rarity of magic items. Using the achievement levels established in the **Reward Mapping** section earlier in this chapter, we can map magic item rarity to the achievement level of rewards as shown on the **Achievement Levels & Magic Items** table.

Magic item benefits linked to rarity show up in equal proportion. So, for example, things like +1 ability bonuses or armor bonuses are uncommon, +2 bonuses are rare, and so forth. Items that grant temporary versions of those benefits are one category more common. Similarly, items with one or more restrictions—as given under **Magic Item Restrictions** (*Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* p. 119)—may also count as a category more common, although the GM should generally avoid restrictions that would render a magic item completely unusable by all of the player characters.

### CHARGED MAGIC ITEMS

Magic items providing a spell bonus—the ability to cast one or more spells—may have an integrated *mage's font* capability, storing a number of Magic Points (MP) to power those spells.

#### ACHIEVEMENT LEVELS & MAGIC ITEMS

CHARACTER LEVEL	ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL	ITEM RARITY
1–4	Beginner	Common
5–8	Adept	Common/Uncommon
9–12	Expert	Uncommon
13–17	Master	Rare
18–20	Legendary	Legendary

This is typically enough to use the item five times. Once a charged item is out of MP, it usually recovers at the same rate as a character: 1d6 MP per hour. Rare charged items recover 2d6 MP per hour, while legendary ones recover 3d6 MP per hour. An item without enough MP to be used can instead draw upon the wielder's own MP but will function in this way only for a mage or a character with a specialty granting them MP of their own.

#### EXAMPLE

*A wand of shadow daggers has a mage's font of 15 MP, enough to cast its spell five times before being depleted. The wand recovers 1d6 MP per hour until it reaches its full charge of 15 MP.*

## WEALTH AND TREASURE

Chests overflowing with coins and gems are often what come to mind when talking about the “rewards” of adventuring, and treasure is a common and important reward. Some *Fantasy AGE* characters may be primarily motivated by a desire for wealth and everything that comes along with it.

### TREASURE CATEGORY & ACHIEVEMENT LEVEL

The treasure categories given in CHAPTER 10 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* map onto the achievement levels described in this chapter fairly well. Trifling and paltry treasures fit the beginner, whereas legendary adventurers can expect lavish treasures on a regular basis, with the categories in between each corresponding with their own achievement level. Note that while the treasure values are given in silver pieces, the actual hoard may include other sorts of coinage as well as valuable items like jewelry, gems, artwork, or even more exotic goods like rare spices, valuable manuscripts or books, or other items. Try to vary the treasures your characters can find, and “compress” some of the value of higher-category treasure hoards into smaller, more portable items rather than mounds of coinage.

### WEALTH, INCOME, AND EXPENSES

Treasure-hunting has a feast-or-famine quality: heroes are either temporarily wealthy, or they are “between treasures” and carefully counting their last coins. It is up to the GM and the players to decide how much they want to keep track of their characters' total wealth as well as their day-to-day expenses; *Fantasy AGE* isn't meant as a remedial course in accounting or bookkeeping!

If you want a looser guideline for measuring character wealth, you can use the following system. Characters may “bank” the minimum value of a treasure category, investing it in long-term savings and income (businesses, loans, investment, property, etc.). Once a character has done this 10 times for a particular treasure category, she gains a monthly income equal to the next-lower treasure category. So, for example, an adventurer who banks 3 silver pieces (the minimum paltry treasure) 10 times (for a total of 30 silver pieces) gains a monthly income of 1d6 silver pieces (the trifling treasure value).

Half of the character's monthly income gained through this system can go toward sustaining a lifestyle at that category. So an adventurer who has built up a middling income (2d6 x 10 silver pieces per month) can devote half of that to pay for a comfortable middling lifestyle when not out adventuring. The remainder of her income can go toward whatever other purchases the character wants—usually equipment and other supplies—and is a good measure of the character's "cash on hand" for such things, if you don't want to keep exact track of it.

Characters can live "above their means," but each month of doing so drops their income by one category per category of excess until they build it up again. So a spendthrift hero with a substantial income who decides to live a lavish lifestyle for a month drops down to a paltry income thereafter, as the debt collectors claim their due.

#### EXAMPLE

## HIGHFALLS SWALE REWARDS

Let's map out the essential rewards for a *Fantasy AGE* campaign for a look at how it can be done. This campaign begins in the Highfalls Swale region outlined in CHAPTER 12 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, although Nicole, the Game Master, plans to move things beyond just that region once the characters gain some levels and capabilities. She intends to start with the *Choosing Night* adventure from the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* as a prequel to the campaign, then jump ahead a few years to the start of the adventurers' careers.

## THE HORDE OF THE DARK TEMPLE CAMPAIGN

The overall arc of Nicole's campaign is "The Horde of the Dark Temple," a rising threat to the peaceful region. Various tribes of savage humanoids in the Inundar Peaks (*Basic Rulebook*, p. 131) are being welded together by a powerful outside force. The Horde will grow in size, strength, and power over the course of the campaign, posing a greater and greater threat. The heroes first deal with some of the initial dangers unleashed by the events of *Choosing Night*, which is also the catalyst for the formation of the Horde—although the player characters are initially unaware of this.

Nicole starts planning her rewards by cross-referencing the different achievement levels with the various possibilities for rewards and with the overall plans for the campaign. She figures that the first few adventures are about the characters "making their bones" as adventurers and discovering some of the adventure potential of the Highfalls Swale, so the beginner levels will help the characters acquire some initial regard and resources. Nicole also wants to take into account opportunities for the adventurers to establish initial memberships, with an eye toward their possible specializations. Since those specializations take place at level 4, qualifying memberships will have to happen around level 3.

For the adept levels, Nicole wants the players thinking tactically. Starting from level 5, they will be persons of import in

the region—some of the most capable adventurers, with only a handful of non-player characters more powerful than they are—so she needs to provide opportunities for the heroes to acquire wealth (physical resources), magic items (power resources), and furthering of their memberships and roles in their organizations. The adept levels also offer opportunities for honorifics and titles, since the heroes are starting to grow into their own and have some history behind them to back those titles up.

## BEGINNER LEVEL REWARDS

Nicole plans to run *Choosing Night* and first looks at the rewards described at the end of that adventure. She then modifies those rewards to suit the idea of the adventure as a prequel from the characters' early years, in line with her goals for the beginner levels (as outlined previously).

### HONORIFICS

A successful ending to *Choosing Night* earns the heroes the honorific of "Chosen Ones," which Nicole decides works mechanically like Fortune-Favored from the *Fantasy AGE Companion*.

### MEMBERSHIPS

Nicole means for the adventurers to meet and work for Lady Khera in Road's End, and so she plans to present them with an offer to join the Lady's Swords by the time they reach level 3 and have proven their mettle. She also outlines some of the guilds in Road's End that might try to recruit promising new adventurers.

### COMPANIONS

Nicole leaves open the possibility of some of the other youths from *Choosing Night* becoming companions, either initially or later on in the campaign. Since she wants to focus the initial adventures on ties between the party members, she doesn't plan to introduce too many opportunities for companions.

### MAGIC ITEMS

One adjustment Nicole makes to the end of *Choosing Night* is changing the "mystic trinkets" the characters might find into a set of artifacts once possessed by the sorceress Dunmara and her knights. These items are initially nothing but fine-quality trophies of an exceptional *Choosing Night*, but the characters' deeds can unlock the artifacts' potential and begin reawakening their powers.

### WEALTH

Nicole plans to issue some initial treasure at the end of *Choosing Night*: enough to equip a small band of adventurers and kick things off. For the initial adventures, there isn't likely to be a lot of treasure the characters can claim, so she creates financial rewards offered in the form of payments from patrons like Lady Khera.

## ADEPT LEVEL REWARDS

By the time the characters reach this achievement level, they should have uncovered the elements of the Dark Temple that have infiltrated the Twofalls community and exposed the potential threat posed by the growing force of humanoids in the Inundar Peaks. They have dealt with one of the Dark Temple's lieutenant priests and brought corrupt elements of the guilds to justice. Now their focus shifts to using the information they have gathered to seek out the Dark Temple itself to address its threat.

### HONORIFICS

The heroes retain their "Chosen Ones" honorific and, by the start of this tier, have also earned the title "Knight-Defenders of the Swale" from Lady Khera and the grateful community at Twofalls. This grants them the aid of virtually any community or official in the Highfalls region.

### MEMBERSHIPS

By this point, Nicole expects the characters to be members of some organization—probably the Lady's Swords—and looks to promote them to rank 2 during this tier. If characters previously took up an offer to work with a corrupt guild, Nicole decides they can transfer their membership to another organization once the guild's corruption is exposed.

### COMPANIONS

Now Nicole looks to introduce a companion or two, including someone the party rescued from the Dark Temple cult in Twofalls and a former member of the Lady's Swords who hopes to redeem himself after taking bribes from a corrupt guild but realizing the error of his ways. Both serve to provide useful information for the group in different ways.

### MAGIC ITEMS

By this point, the adventurers have unlocked some of the potential of their artifacts. They have also been able to acquire magic items from their explorations and the trove of the cult in Twofalls. Nicole aims to have each character acquire a total of roughly three to four permanent magic items at this tier, transitioning away from some of the more temporary items they've found and used.

### WEALTH

Nicole has kept the party on local patrons' payrolls up until now, without a lot of opportunities to build their wealth. The trove of the Dark Temple cult yielded some extra wealth, and now the party's explorations into the caves, tunnels, and crevasses of the Inundar Peaks offer opportunities for found treasure rather than simple payment—which will certainly change their positions in the Swale.

Further adventures—and rewards—await!

## RANDOM ITEMS

At times a Game Master might need to place a random weapon or piece of armor in an encounter. Perhaps the character is disarmed and seeks to grab a serviceable weapon from a villain's armory or treasure stash, or loot armor off a creature's last victim. That item might even have some special qualities, either as a feature of construction quality or of enchantment. The following tables can be used to generate those kinds of items on the fly.

In campaigns where certain weapons or armor do not exist or are rare, GMs should feel free to alter or reroll results. This is often the case with grenades or black powder weapons, but it could apply to any weapon, shield, or type of armor that is uncommon, exceptionally expensive to produce, or otherwise rarely seen in a campaign.

Be sure to come up with a unique name and interesting, distinctive features for any Masterwork or magical items generated using these tables. Legendary and artifact items are **not** intended to be covered by these tables; they should be created with specific purpose instead of random rolls. However, GMs can use these tables to refine even the basic details of such extraordinary weapons and armor if desired.

## WEAPON GROUPS & SHOPS

For purchasing items in shops, the **Armor**, **Shields**, and **Weapon Groups** tables can be used to determine the selection of armaments available for sale, and the **Craftsmanship** table can determine the quality of them. If you want a specific weapon in addition to a group, roll a d3 and reference the **Weapons** table in the **Equipment** chapter of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*. The Grenades weapon group requires some special handling. When rolling on the **Weapon Groups** table, if the Grenades group is rolled, treat a 5 on the second die as the shop selling grenade-making materials and a 6 as selling actual grenades. For a specific type of grenade, roll a d6 on the **Grenades** table in the same chapter noted previously.

ARMOR	
3D6	RESULT
3-4	None
5-9	Light Leather
10-12	Heavy Leather
13-14	Light Mail
15	Heavy Mail
16	Light Plate
17-18	Heavy Plate

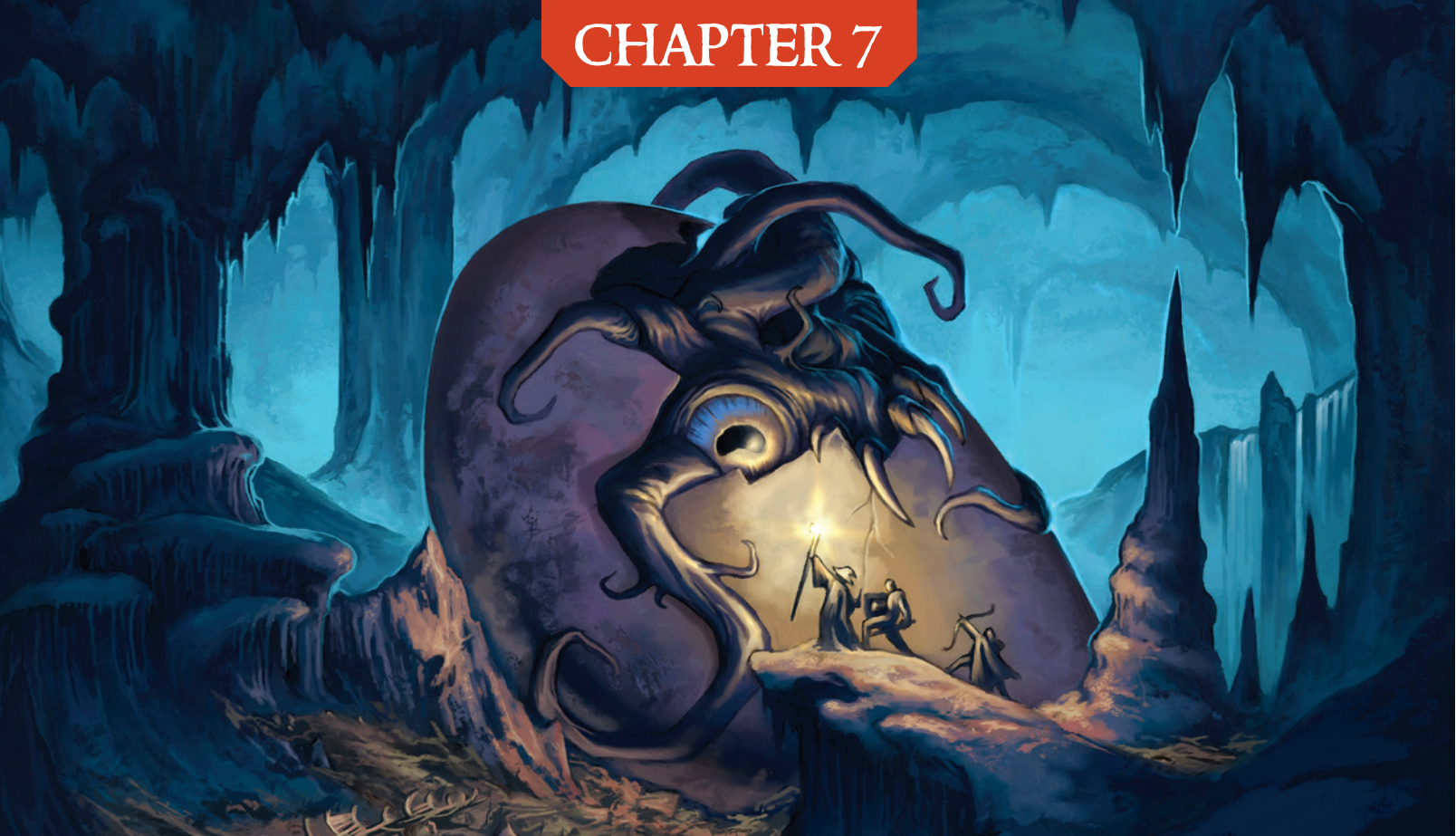
SHIELDS	
D6	RESULT
1-2	None
3-4	Light Shield
5	Medium Shield
6	Heavy Shield

WEAPON GROUPS		
D6	D6	RESULT
1	1-3	Axes
	4-6	Bludgeons
2	1-3	Bows
	4-6	Dueling
3	1-3	Heavy Blades
	4-6	Lances
4	1-3	Light Blades
	4-6	Polearms
5	1-3	Spears
	4-6	Staves
6	1-2	Black Powder
	3-4	Brawling
	5-6	Grenades

CRAFTSMANSHIP	
3D6	RESULT
3-4	<b>SHODDY:</b> A character failing a Cunning (Evaluation) test doesn't notice their acquisition is nearly useless until their time or money is spent. The supplier of this item may or may not take well to their poor craftsmanship being pointed out.
5-6	<b>BELOW AVERAGE:</b> -1 to damage, Armor Rating, attack, or Defense
7-13	<b>AVERAGE:</b> As normal
14	<b>ABOVE AVERAGE:</b> +1 to damage or Armor Rating
15	<b>FINE:</b> +1 to attack or Defense
16	<b>SUPERIOR:</b> +2 to damage or Armor Rating
17	<b>EXPERT:</b> +2 to attack or Defense
18	<b>MASTERWORK:</b> +3 to damage or Armor Rating

MAGICAL PROPERTIES	
3D6	RESULT
3	<b>CURSED!</b> Roll once more on this table for positive benefits, but this item is also cursed. Choose an encounter type (combat, exploration, or roleplaying). This character suffers a penalty to all tests during this type of encounter. This penalty should be in the range of -1 to -3 and be comparable to the cursed item's benefits, but should not contradict those benefits. For example, an item offering a bonus to attack rolls should not also have a penalty to all combat tests. Its new owner cannot discard it no matter how they try. If someone else tries to discard it for them, the owner will do anything they can to get it back. A character who succeeds in a Willpower (Self-Discipline) test can overcome this compulsion for a number of days equal to the Stunt Die result, but they suffer a penalty to all tests while they are resisting the pull to recover the item. This penalty should be the same as the encounter-specific penalty while possessing the item.
4	<b>TALENT BONUS:</b> The GM chooses a talent. This item grants a number of degrees of that talent equal to the Stunt Die result.
5	<b>ATTACK BONUS:</b> This item grants an attack bonus equal to half the Stunt Die result, rounded up.
6	<b>ARMOR BONUS:</b> This item grants an Amor Rating bonus equal to half the Stunt Die result, rounded up.
7	<b>DAMAGE BONUS:</b> This item grants a damage bonus equal to the Stunt Die result divided by three, rounded up.
8	<b>ABILITY BONUS:</b> The GM chooses an ability. This item grants a bonus to that ability equal to the Stunt Die result divided by three, rounded up.
9	<b>DEFENSE BONUS:</b> This item grants a Defense bonus equal to the Stunt Die result divided by three, rounded up.
10-11	<b>FOCUS BONUS:</b> The GM chooses a focus. This item grants the chosen focus or increases the bonus of that focus by 1.
12	<b>STUNT BONUS:</b> The GM chooses a stunt. This item allows the user to use the stunt for -1 SP. If the Stunt Die result on this Magical Properties roll is a 6, this reduction can reduce the cost to 0 SP, but the character must still roll doubles to use the stunt. Otherwise, the cost of a stunt cannot be reduced below 1 SP.
13	<b>HAZARD PROTECTION:</b> The GM chooses a form of damage (such as poison or lightning). This item allows the owner to take half damage from damage of this type.
14	<b>ARCANA PROTECTION:</b> The GM chooses an arcana. This item allows the owner to take half damage from spells in this arcana.
15	<b>SPELL BONUS:</b> The GM chooses a spell. This item grants the use of this spell if the character doesn't already know it. If the Stunt Die result on this Magical Properties roll is a 6, the spell can be used by characters who do not possess Magic Points. Otherwise, the spell can only be used by characters who can normally cast spells.
16	<b>HAZARD IMMUNITY:</b> The GM chooses a form of damage (such as poison or lightning). This item grants complete immunity to damage of this type.
17	<b>ARCANA IMMUNITY:</b> The GM chooses an arcana. This item grants complete immunity to spells in this arcana.
18	<b>MULTI-BONUS:</b> Roll twice more on this table. If you roll the same thing twice or roll an 18 again, re-roll until you get a different result.





## BUILDING MONSTERS & ADVERSARIES

BRYAN  
SYME

**M**onsters are cool. Like magic and impossible scenery, monsters are one of the main reasons we play fantasy role-playing games. Facing off against impossible foes, challenging the giant, and slaying the dragon are what heroic tales are made of.

In terms of the *Fantasy AGE* rules, however, monsters are not only inhuman foes. Human threats can easily be “monsters” as well. The evil duke or the corrupt sorcerer are in many ways simply different versions of the angry troll lord or vile wraith featuring as threats in many campaigns. Regardless of species or origin, the same general principles of adversary and monster design covered in this chapter apply.

### ROLE AND BALANCE

While you can make antagonist characters using the same rules you’d use to make player characters, in many cases this is overkill. Monster stats are focused on what you need to run the character as an enemy, ally, or rival in your campaign, rather than making a character balanced against the player characters.

Monsters can fulfill many roles in your game, from simple speed bumps and cannon fodder to the focus of an entire campaign. For a monster that will be the focus of a campaign or series of adventures, there are important considerations. The monster needs to be interesting enough to drive the narrative and versatile enough that it can remain a focus as the characters increase in level.

There are a few ways to have a monster be the focus of the story. The most obvious is to have the monster (or monsters) be intelligent, with their own plans and intrigues. This allows the monster to react to the heroes and can give rise to many different types of stories as the characters deal with different elements of the monster’s plans. In this case, you might have a single mastermind monster, such as an eldritch crown taking control of key leaders to take over a country, or a medusa establishing herself as the kingpin of a city’s criminal underworld. Or someone could be making more monsters of a specific type, like a master vampire controlling a conspiracy of vampire thralls or a crazed wizard unleashing a horde of twisted chimera or other magically altered monsters upon the countryside. In either case, the mastermind’s plans drive the story of the campaign.

Having an entire group of monsters is another option, with the group as a whole being the ultimate antagonist of the campaign. In this case, you’ll want to use a monster which can be individualized, with not only different types of troops for the same monster but also NPCs to be leaders and personal foes for the heroes. This could be a war party, such as a horde of fomoiri led by a dark sorcerer and a demon-possessed champion, who want to reclaim their lost empire, or a group of sea devils raiding ships and using the weapons and magic they gain to launch an assault on the land. It could be an otherworldly invasion of craterlings, spreading from an initial impact site like a blight, or a group of shard lords enslaving villages and towns, trying to acquire magical power on this new plane. The group could also be subtler,

With all this talk of the history of the monster and how you are using it in the campaign, you may ask whether you should think of the story for the monster first, or the mechanics. The truth is, this choice is mostly up to you, and there are advantages to both. If you focus on mechanics, you'll do your best to make sure the monster you create is an appropriate challenge for the level of the characters in your game and it fills the type of encounter you want. If you start with the story, however, the abilities and special qualities of the monster will flow more organically from what makes sense for the creature, rather than what fits within the Threat level.

The best way is likely somewhere in between. Having a story in mind but creating the monster mechanically to provide an appropriate challenge for the characters should keep you from making a monster that's either too challenging or too easy, while still keeping it an interesting and lively part of your campaign.

such as a conspiracy of werebeasts working together to sway the course of a nation in their favor. The campaign in this case is driven by the larger group, with the heroes having plenty of chances to confront individual members, gain rivals, and defeat the group's leaders before they can actually stop their plans once and for all.

Alternatively, the monster might be difficult to deal with, and the heroes need to gather specific information, weapons, or materials in order to stop it. In this case, the monster's first appearance is almost something of a MacGuffin, a plot device used to move things along but which rarely directly affects the overall plot, story, or events at the time. The monster remains an end goal for the campaign, with the individual adventures being about preparing for the eventual confrontation. This works best with powerful, rare, or even completely unique monsters. A quest to find a way of destroying the control relic for a towering rampaging zenadrim or a series of adventures gathering the allies and equipment needed to hunt down a vicious sea wurm terrorizing shipping are both examples of this sort of campaign.

Finally, a campaign may use a type of monster as a sort of theme for the campaign, without the individual monsters necessarily being connected. Maybe in your setting, giants are particularly important in history and myth, and the heroes spend a larger than average amount of time dealing with them. Or your campaign may be under threat from demonic forces, and most of the adventures within the campaign involve dealing with demons—sometimes as enemies, and perhaps, sometimes, as allies. Perhaps the campaign revolves around a plateau where ancient monsters live, full of thunderlords, knifehounds, and other primal beasts. In campaigns like this, the monsters are not necessarily a cohesive group, but their influence is constantly felt.

## MONSTERS & SUBGENRES

Fantasy comes in many different subgenres (discussed in more detail in **CHAPTER 9: BUILDING SUBGENRES**). These subgenres are reinforced by the types of stories you tell, the tone and details of your world—and yes, the types of monsters you use in your campaign. Sometimes specific monsters work particularly well in evoking the feel of specific subgenres. For other subgenres, the number and power of monsters is more important than the specific monsters used. In either case, working within a specific subgenre may mean you need to spend some additional time considering what monsters you wish to use in your game.

## HORROR

In some ways, coming up with monsters for a fantasy horror game seems like it could be the easiest of all. If you are going for a specific flavor of gothic horror, then vampires, werewolves, ghosts, and other undead are all common monsters. Monsters in this sort of horror are often picked specifically because of how close they are to human—a warning to the characters that they, themselves, could end up like the monster if they are not careful.

Other types of horror, however, trade on how alien the monsters are to humans. Demons, devils, spirits, creatures from other worlds, or beings from other dimensions prey on the characters, but the characters will not be able to truly understand their motivations. They can only do their best to stop them.

## HIGH FANTASY

When it comes to picking monsters for high fantasy, the sky is the limit! High fantasy tends to have a vast array of magical creatures, ancient civilizations, and mythic monsters. Almost any monsters can fit into a high-fantasy game as long as you take the time to use them in a way that matches the tone and feel of your campaign. However, many high-fantasy settings favor the classics to maintain a certain feel: dragons, ogres, and other common but interesting and dangerous threats.

## SWORD AND SORCERY

Sword and sorcery tends toward having few monsters, and even fewer intelligent monsters. The monsters the characters do encounter tend to be unique and rarely seen by the average person in the setting. Particularly vicious beasts and remnants of ancient civilizations are common, as are demons and strange things born from dark sorcery.

Rarity breeds significance, however. The less common monsters tend to be more important to the world, have more legends around them, and are often very dangerous. A threat that would be moderately dangerous in another subgenre, such as an ogre, in sword and sorcery becomes a deadly throwback to an ancient time, worshipped as a monstrous god by the locals. Already powerful and dangerous adversaries, such as demons and dragons, can easily affect whole nations, with cults and other institutions rising up in their honor.

# MAKING MONSTERS

The *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* provide a number of monsters with statistics for your game, from lowly goblins up to terrifying demon lords, as well as guidelines for altering those monsters. However, maybe you want to alter a monster more extensively or create an entirely new and unique monster! You've come to the right place. Here you'll find step-by-step suggestions on making a new monster.

There are many reasons why you might want to make unique monsters for your campaign. Unique monsters add color to your campaign, and they differentiate your world and your adventures from other campaigns. New monsters your heroes haven't encountered before can challenge their players, keeping them from relying on knowledge they've pulled from previous campaigns or other games. Or perhaps the existing monsters just don't fit a story you want to tell or need to be modified to fit within your setting. And above all, crafting a new monster for your campaign is just fun!

Making a new monster can involve many different things. While it can involve creating a new monster completely from scratch, it may be as simple as taking stats for an existing creature and changing the name or a few details. Perhaps you want to use the rat king from the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* as a swarm of flesh-eating beetles, or simply change its speed to a swimming speed and make it a school of cinematic piranhas. Or you can create a template by combining a number of special qualities and changes to make a standard package you can apply to any monster.

## EXAMPLE

*Rose's campaign involves an invasion of monsters from the realm of nightmares. She decides to create a "nightmare beast" template which increases Communication and Intelligence by 1, adds the Deception and Intimidation focuses, and gives the monsters the eldritch and shifting special qualities (from the Fantasy AGE Bestiary), to represent the nightmare creatures. This template can be applied to everything from bears to dragons as needed to create nightmare-spawned adversaries.*

## STEP 1

### CONCEPT

When creating a new monster, either completely from scratch or by modifying an existing monster, you'll first need to consider exactly what monster you are creating. Beyond just a basic description of the creature—"I want to create a giant snake monster!"—you'll also want to consider how you intend to use the monster in your game and how the monster fits into your campaign world.

### GAME ROLE

The role the monster fills in your game is a very important consideration. Is this monster intended to be cannon fodder, appearing in hordes for the heroes to cleave through as they

make their way to their objective? Or is it intended to be a major antagonist the characters will have a great deal of difficulty with?

What sorts of scenes will you be using the monster in, and how will it present a challenge to the heroes? A mindless monster may only be able to be subdued in combat, and it presents a challenge simply by being tough and hitting hard. On the other hand, some intelligent monsters will communicate with the characters and can be reasoned with—or will attempt to convince the characters to take their side. Some monsters are weak in a physical fight but have a great deal of magical power. Once you know how the monster is likely to challenge the characters, you can use this information to help you assign abilities, attacks, and special qualities to the monster.

## SETTING

In addition to the mechanics, you'll want to consider how the monster fits into the world of your campaign. Have people heard of this monster before, or is it something new? How does it interact with people or other monsters?

Often, this involves creating at least some sense of history for the monster. Where did it come from? Is it a creation of an angry god, sent as a plague on the mortals who stopped worshipping her? Or is it a natural, if rare and unusual, animal in your campaign world? Perhaps it was spawned from the blood of a murdered demon lord or is a throwback to an ancient time before recorded history.

Consider creating an ecology for the monster. How does it interact with the world around it? If it's intelligent, what sort of society does it create? If it is a type of animal, is it predator or prey? What does the monster eat? Where does it live? These sorts of details are not necessary in every game, but they can make the creature feel more real and give you additional ideas on how to use the monster in your adventures—and give clever players ideas on how to deal with it!

Some monsters are unique creatures, possibly even legendary within the world. This can give encounters with them an epic or mythic feel. If the characters are interacting with not a medusa, but Medusa, the one and only who was cursed by the gods, the players will get an entirely different sense of the setting. If there is only one dragon in all the world, anyone who attempts to fight it is either extremely brave or very foolhardy. Unique monsters are generally a big deal within a setting.

## STEP 2

### CHOOSE A THREAT LEVEL

Once you have a concept for the monster, you'll want to decide on a Threat level for it. Having a Threat level lets you assign attacks, Health, and other statistics to the monster so you have a good idea how much of a challenge it will be to the party. Each Threat level represents a reasonable challenge to characters at a small range of levels.

The Threat level for a monster is assigned based on the way they usually behave. Goblins generally operate as a group; a single goblin wouldn't even be a Minor Threat to most characters.

You'll usually choose the Threat level matching the level of the characters in your game. However, you may want to make a group of monsters for a particularly easy fight or create a monster you know is beyond the characters—for now. If you do make your monster too high a Threat level for the heroes, you should do your best to telegraph the challenge they are getting themselves into.

THREAT LEVEL	
THREAT LEVEL	PC LEVEL RANGE
Minor	Levels 1–4
Moderate	Levels 5–8
Major	Levels 9–12
Dire	Levels 13–17
Legendary	Levels 18–20

### STEP 3

## ASSIGN ABILITIES

Your next step will be to assign abilities to the monster. Monsters use the same nine abilities as characters: Accuracy, Communication, Constitution, Dexterity, Fighting, Intelligence, Perception, Strength, and Willpower.

For player character races, a rating of 1 in an ability is considered average, with a -2 being about as low as a person can usually go and a 4 being exceptionally good. For monsters, abilities sometimes range lower, and they often range much higher. Unintelligent monsters in particular tend to have very low Intelligence, and gigantic creatures often possess very high Strength and Constitution.

Before assigning abilities, consider what sort of a challenge the monster will pose to the characters. Monsters that are dangerous in combat have high Accuracy or Fighting, Strength, and Constitution, while monsters using spells or special abilities may have Intelligence or Willpower as their highest score. Monsters meant to be negotiated with will instead have high Communication.

### ABILITIES BASED ON THREAT LEVEL

There is no total number of ability “points” to assign a monster based on its Threat level—monsters have the ability ratings that make sense for them. However, here are some guidelines on how to assign abilities based on Threat level. For all of these guidelines, it is definitely possible to go outside them, such as having a Moderate Threat with a 7 in Strength. However, you should be aware that you are doing it, so that you do so deliberately and balance these strengths out with sufficient weaknesses to maintain the overall Threat level. When looking at these guidelines, please note that negative ability ratings do not contribute to these totals, nor do they count against the total; simply treat a negative rating as a “0” when adding them together.

#### MINOR

For Minor threats, most monsters will have somewhere between 10 and 20 points spent on abilities, though some monsters (walking dead, for instance) have a few 0 or nega-

tive ability scores. The highest ability for Minor Threats is usually between a 2 and 4 rating—appropriate for monsters meant to challenge starting characters.

#### MODERATE

Moderate Threats have ability ratings that add up to a total between 12 and 30, with their highest rating around a 4 to 6.

#### MAJOR

Major Threats have a total of between 15 and 35 for their combined ability ratings. The highest scores for Major Threats are 4–8.

#### DIRE

For Dire Threats, assign ability ratings with a total of between 15 and 40. The highest abilities for Dire Threats are usually between 6 and 8, but they sometimes get as high as 10.

#### LEGENDARY

For Legendary Threats, the sum of the ability ratings should be somewhere between 20 and 40. The highest abilities for Legendary monsters can go over 10.

## ASSIGNING MONSTER ABILITIES

Each ability has a different impact on gameplay, particularly for monsters. You'll want to consider what each ability is used for, and how it affects the danger the monster poses, when assigning abilities.

#### ACCURACY

Accuracy is one of the two attack abilities for *Fantasy AGE*, used for light weapons, ranged weapons, and bites. The vast majority of monsters have between a +3 and a +6 for their main attacks. If the monster does not use light weapons or does not directly attack in combat, it may have a low Accuracy, or even a 0 in that ability. Think carefully before assigning an Accuracy of more than 4 or 5—when combined with focuses, the monster may hit more often than you expect.

#### COMMUNICATION

Communication is an important ability for scheming monsters and those tending to use social tricks or deception to get their way. Conversely, animals, constructs, and unintelligent monsters often have low or even negative Communication scores.

#### CONSTITUTION

A high Constitution gives a monster more Health and is generally used for particularly large or tough monsters. For these monsters, particularly at Major and Dire Threat levels, it is common for Constitution to be one of their highest abilities. Fragile monsters and quick but easily tired monsters likely have a low Constitution.

#### DEXTERITY

Dexterity determines a monster's defense, so this is another ability where you'll want to be careful you don't grant too high

a score. A score of 4 is already exceptional, and a 6 is practically superhuman. Giving a monster a Dexterity higher than 6 can make it very difficult to hit, particularly at lower levels. Small, quick, and stealthy monsters generally have a high Dexterity, while large monsters usually have a lower score.

## FIGHTING

Like Accuracy, Fighting is an attack ability, used for melee weapons, claws, kicks, and most natural weapons. Most monsters have between a +3 and a +6 for their main attacks. This usually includes any appropriate focus, so the Fighting score for even dangerous monsters rarely goes above 4 or 5. A monster weak in melee combat may have Fighting 0, even if it is a Major or Dire Threat. An exceptionally skilled or dangerous opponent may have a Fighting score of 6 or 7, but this means it will miss only rarely.

## INTELLIGENCE

Animals and unintelligent monsters often have negative Intelligence scores, as do some monsters prone to acting impulsively or without thought. A high Intelligence is particularly important for monsters acting as masterminds as well as monsters with Arcana.

## PERCEPTION

Many monsters have good to excellent Perception, particularly animals. If a monster is known for its keen senses, give it a high Perception. Perception also adds to damage from ranged attacks, so for higher-Threat monsters relying on ranged attacks, a high Perception will ensure they are dealing an appropriate amount of damage.

## STRENGTH

Strength is probably the most common ability for monsters to have at very high levels, particularly for Major, Dire, and Legendary Threats. Large monsters will usually have high Strength, as will any monster known for dealing a great deal of damage in melee combat.

## WILLPOWER

A high Willpower is common among monsters too courageous or stubborn to run from a fight. It is also common among highly magical monsters using Arcana and those resistant to magical effects.

## STEP 4

# FOCUSES

Focuses are areas of particular expertise the monster has within an ability. Having a focus allows the monster to be better in a specific area without increasing the ability as a whole.

Almost every monster has a focus with its primary form of attack—only monsters that pretty much never directly attack anyone will not have some sort of attack focus. Even creatures attacking with magic will usually have an Arcane Blast focus. These attack focuses might be weapons for intelligent creatures, or a bite or claw focus for beasts.

Other focuses are assigned based on what makes sense for the monster in question. Is it particularly sneaky? Give it the Stealth focus. If it is a beast with particularly sharp senses, give it the Hearing or Smelling focuses. Particularly disciplined enemies might have the Courage or Morale focuses.

Most monsters have between four and eight focuses, but particularly skilled and knowledgeable monsters have many more, and some have only one or two. Don't spend too much time worrying about giving a monster a focus for everything it's good at. Give it one for its primary attacks, a few others that make sense, and move on to the next step.

## STEP 5

# ATTACKS

After assigning abilities and focuses, you'll want to consider the attacks the monster makes. Is this monster primarily dangerous because of its physical attacks, or is it more dangerous because of special qualities, like the spectre's Terror or the shadow person's ability to feed? While you probably already considered this when assigning the monster's Accuracy and Fighting abilities, it's a good idea to make sure those abilities are still appropriate.

You'll want to give a monster at least one attack, even if it does not normally fight opponents physically. Even a complete noncombatant focused on mind-controlling enemies into attacking for it will still be able to punch or slap ineffectually. Most monsters will also have at least one alternate attack.

For intelligent, humanoid monsters, attacks are usually based on a weapon. Use the weapons from the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* to determine the damage of the attack, plus either Strength or Perception, just like you would determine damage for a character. If the monster is large, such as an ogre, add an additional 1d6 to the weapon's damage. This is often represented by a special quality.

One common trick is giving a creature a more accurate attack that does less damage and a less accurate attack that does more. This helps simulate threats so common in many films, TV shows, and books that land a flurry of minor blows and sometimes connect with a nastier attack. Note that this design choice combines with a stunt system that already somewhat allows for this approach, so remember that any attack can be theoretically enhanced with stunts like Lethal Blow and Pierce Armor.

Secondary attacks for weapon wielders might be a ranged weapon for a melee combatant, or a backup weapon the monster can use if disarmed or otherwise prevented from using its main attack. For beasts and non-humanoid monsters, attacks are more varied. These attacks might be bites, tentacles, stings, claws, or just about any sort of natural weapon you can think of. The most common attacks of this type are bites and claws.

## NATURAL WEAPONS

Many monsters have natural weapons such as teeth, claws, and horns to aid in self-defense and attacking unlucky adventurers. In most cases, even unusual methods of attack can be broken down into whether they are more like a claw (an accurate but

lower-damage attack designed to wear down a target) or a bite (a nasty blow that's harder to land but much deadlier).

Most claw attacks do 1d6+1 plus Strength damage. This is generally a good benchmark for attacks like tentacles or stings as well – any natural weapon adapted to harm foes, but not particularly large ones. Claw damage does not generally increase with a creature's size unless the monster has talons particularly well adapted for slashing and tearing.

When assigning damage to bite attacks, start with 1d6 plus Strength. If the monster is large, add 1d6 to the damage of its bite. You can also add 1d6 to the monster's bite damage if it is particularly well adapted to biting by having exceptionally sharp teeth, a large mouth with strong jaws, or something similar. For example, dragons, ghouls, sharks, and thunderlords all have this additional 1d6 in their bite damage. These two bonuses stack, so if you have a monster that is both large and particularly bitey, it will have a bite damage of 3d6 plus Strength.

Because of the way size adds to damage, most large monsters are at least Major Threats, if not Dire.

## STEP 6

## SPECIAL QUALITIES

Next, you'll want to assign special qualities to the monster you are creating. Special qualities cover all the special attacks, stunts, weaknesses, talents, and other powers that don't fall under the standard abilities and characteristics all monsters have. For monsters that use weapons, this includes weapon groups and weapon style talents.

There are a large number of special qualities already created in the dozens of monsters you can find in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary*. Many of those qualities are used in multiple monsters – the Big quality, for example, is the same for just about any humanoid enemy roughly the size of an ogre. Reusing qualities from other monsters or from the lists of special qualities available as modifications is the easiest way to come up with appropriate qualities for a monster.

## STUNTS

Just like characters, monsters can use stunts. Knowing the favored stunts for the monster ahead of time can save you time and effort when running the monster in combat. A strong or dangerous monster might favor Mighty Blow, a fast monster might favor Skirmish or Lightning Attack, and a clever monster might use Pierce Armor. It is also not uncommon for monsters to have qualities that reduce the costs of certain stunts. Do this if you want to make sure the monster uses a particular stunt as one of its most common tactics whenever it gains stunt points.

## SPECIAL ATTACKS

Special attacks are another common special quality. Special attacks are any sort of additional effect a monster can do beyond attacking to deal damage. A special attack that completely replaces the monster's normal attack should be created as a major action. These are things like a dragon's Breath weapon





or the spectre's Terror ability. A special attack used in addition to the monster's normal damage, or one representing a surprise maneuver the monster doesn't use all the time, should be modeled with a stunt. These are things like the manticore's Poison Sting or the thunderlord's Pinning Stomp. Finally, some special attacks are minor actions. Minor action abilities work best for things the monster barely pays attention to, such as the air elemental's Wind Buffet, or to add additional attacks to a very dangerous creature.

Giving a monster additional attacks of any sort will make it more dangerous and better able to act alone against a group of heroes. For Minor or Moderate Threat monsters, it is best to stick with stunts that allow the monster to gain additional attacks, such as the Quick Bite stunt the bouda and ghouls have. Qualities allowing the monster to get an additional attack with every major action, such as the manticore's Tooth & Claw, are usually only given to Major or Dire Threats. If you do give multiple attacks to Minor or Moderate Threat monsters, make sure those multiple attacks do less damage—definitely no more than 1d6 plus the monster's Strength.

## OTHER SPECIAL QUALITIES

Other special qualities are a catch-all for other abilities or traits the monster has—such as being amphibious or being a swarm of smaller creatures. Any weaknesses a monster has will be

listed here. It is also common for monsters that don't wear armor to have a special quality representing any natural armor they may have. The appropriate Armor Rating for monsters of different threat levels is discussed in the next step.

Some monsters, particularly intelligent ones, use talents in the same way characters do. A skilled combatant may have Armor Training or one or more weapon style talents. The Quick Reflexes and Scouting talents are also common. Scheming monsters might have the Intrigue talent. As a guideline, Minor and Moderate Threats usually have only one or two talents, usually at the Novice or, rarely, the Journeyman degree. Major and Dire Threats can have more, with the Journeyman degree being much more likely, and some Dire Threats have Master talents. As always, you can go outside these guidelines if it makes sense for the monster you are creating. If you are making an incredibly fast Minor Threat, it may make sense to give it the Quick Reflexes talent at the Master degree, but you'll want to consider this sort of thing carefully.

Magical monsters may have Arcana talents—though it is worth noting that it's also fine for the monster just to be able to cast appropriate spells without having the other benefits of the appropriate Arcana talent. In fact, for some monsters, it may make more sense to not even calculate the Magic Points they have available—you can simply decide they can cast one spell once or twice during an encounter and leave it at that.

For creatures that use weapons, you may want to determine what weapon groups they have training in. Obviously, the monster will have the weapon groups for any weapons it has a focus in or has selected as being among its primary attacks in the previous step. Most humanoid monsters should also have access to the Brawling group. If you want the monster to be able to use a variety of weapons or foresee a situation where it might try to take a weapon from a character, having this information can be useful, but it is not necessary, particularly for monsters you expect the heroes to swiftly defeat.

### STEP 7

## COMBAT TRAITS

The last traits you need to determine for your monster are its combat traits: Speed, Health, Defense, and Armor Rating.

Speed for most monsters is determined in the same way it is for characters: 10 + Dexterity. For a monster wearing armor, remember to apply any armor penalties to its Speed. If the monster is particularly swift, feel free to add a few points to its Speed. Also determine any additional movement types for the monster. A flying creature more at home in the air with a Dexterity of 4 might have a flight Speed of 16, but only an 8 for its ground Speed. A clumsy flyer more comfortable walking might instead have a ground Speed of 14, but a flying Speed of 10. Choose a Speed appropriate for the monster.

## HEALTH

Health is probably the trait that depends the most on the Threat level of the monster, with Health levels ranging from 10 or 15 for Minor Threats up to 300 for the legendary zenadrim. The easiest way to determine the Health of your monster is to look at similar monsters that already exist. A group of Minor Threat thieves that aren't much of a challenge individually should have around 15 Health, while a Major Threat of a magically controlled giant war elephant would have around 85 Health.

If you are completely unsure how much Health to give a monster, a good place to start is to take the level of PCs you expect the monster to oppose, add its Constitution, and multiply that number by 5:  $(\text{Level} + \text{Constitution}) \times 5 = \text{Health}$ . You can then adjust this number, adding 5 Health for a monster that is particularly large or tough, or reducing its Health if it is particularly fragile.

Keep in mind the role the monster is intended for. If the monster is supposed to be a big set-piece battle, able to fight mostly on its own, give it more Health. If the monster only attacks in large groups, reduce its Health. Many Dire Threats are intended to fight the entire party of characters single-handedly. If this is the case for your monster, don't be afraid to give it an additional 30 or more Health to make certain it lasts long enough to make the fight interesting.

## DEFENSE

Defense is calculated in much the same way it is for characters, as  $10 + \text{Dexterity}$ . Some qualities can adjust this slightly, such as Small creatures having a slightly higher Defense. Most monsters have a Defense between 10 and 14, only rarely going down to 8 or up as high as 16. A monster with a Defense lower than 8 is almost impossible to miss for any decent combatant. On the other end of the spectrum, a character with Fighting 5 and focus in her weapon will still hit a 16 Defense monster only about 75 percent of the time. Think very carefully before adjusting a monster's Defense outside this range.

## ARMOR RATING

Armor Rating can vary a great deal, depending on the type and Threat level of the monster you are creating. Most corporeal monsters have at least a little bit of an Armor Rating, even if it's just a few points from having tough skin. For monsters wearing armor, simply use the appropriate Armor Rating based on what armor they're wearing. For other monsters, assign a few points based on the monster's Threat level. As always, you can go outside this range if it makes sense for your monster. A monster made of people necromantically fused together into a horrifying, fleshy wall may have no Armor Rating despite being a Major Threat, while a Moderate Threat may have an Armor Rating of 8 if its skin has been turned into living metal.

## LAST STEPS

At this point, you should have all the game statics for your monster. Go back over the monster and make sure the numbers

### ARMOR RATING BY THREAT LEVEL

THREAT LEVEL	ARMOR RATING
Minor	2-3
Moderate	3-5
Major	4-6
Dire	6-9
Legendary	7-10

you are seeing make sense for both its place in the campaign world and how you intend to use it in your game. Does the Health make sense for the Threat level? Is it likely to kill a hero in one shot if it lands a particularly lucky blow? Whether that is a good thing or a bad thing depends very much on the style of your individual campaign, but you should definitely be aware if it is a possibility. Also take this time to consider how you plan to run the monster in conflicts – having a good idea of the monster's tactics now means that when you get to the table, you can focus on the game.

With all of that done, your monster is ready to surprise and wow your players!

### MONSTER-BUILDING EXAMPLE

## EXTRAPLANAR PUPPETMASTERS

To see the above process in action, we'll follow Mark as he creates a new monster for his campaign.

### STEP 1

## CONCEPT

Mark wants to create a new monster for his campaign: a secretive group working as shadowy manipulators. He envisions creepy monsters conducting a sort of quiet invasion, stealing information and taking control of people. Wanting something he knows will freak out his players a little, he decides to make a race of spider creatures. Based on both the word for spider in Middle English (and modern Dutch) and the traditional fantasy roleplaying monsters, he decides to call them ettercops.

In considering how they fit into the setting, Mark knows he wants the race to be a sort of invading force, but he likes the idea of ancient ruins and artifacts providing some hints and foreshadowing about the creatures. So the ettercops had an ancient civilization, where they experimented with strange magic. They were defeated in a war and fled to the "webs between worlds," a sort of interdimensional space, leaving behind ruins and relics both magical and mundane. Their enemies set up enchantments to keep them banished, locked outside the world. However, these spells have begun to fail, and the ettercops have begun to return.

As they have been gone for such a long time, Mark doesn't think the ettercops have many connections to the other races and creatures in his campaign. The enemies who banished the ettercops have been gone a long time as well, though





Mark thinks it might be fun if this were the same empire that spawned the morlocks (from the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary*). Ettercops feed on other animals and have no compunctions about eating intelligent beings. However, they consider this a waste of resources – Mark wants the ettercops to be able to control other beings to some extent, turning other humanoid races into servants.

Physically, the ettercops look like giant spiders, but in place of the spider's head they have the arms and head of a human. The arms are essentially where a spider's pedipalps would be, and the human head has four eyes (one set above, one set below) and mandibles like a spider.

#### STEP 2

### CHOOSE A THREAT LEVEL

Based on where he sees the campaign going, Mark decides to make the basic ettercop a Moderate Threat, though with unique abilities that make them especially dangerous to the unprepared. While he envisions these strange creatures and their web-bound puppets to be larger threats later in the campaign, he wants the heroes to be able to fight ettercops at least once or twice in the Moderate level range. Eventually he will make some tougher "bosses," using the guidelines for **Beefing Up Adversaries** on page 104 of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*, and giving the bosses access to the Fate and Shadow Arcana.

#### STEP 3

### ASSIGN ABILITIES

Mark decides the obvious starting point when creating ettercops is to use the giant spider as a base. However, as the giant spider is a Minor Threat, and an ettercop is a Moderate Threat, he knows he'll need to make them a little stronger.

Mark gives the ettercop an Accuracy of 3, the same as the giant spider. As ettercops are capable of speech and interacting with the characters, he makes Communication a 2. He also increases the ettercop's Constitution to 3, as opposed to the giant spider's Constitution 2.

Thinking of the ettercop as being a quick and stealthy opponent, Mark gives it Dexterity 4. He assigns a 3 to Fighting, as he wants ettercops to have additional attacks beyond their bite. Ettercops are very intelligent schemers, so they get an Intelligence of 4. Perception and Strength stay the same as the giant spider, 2 and 3 respectively. Finally, the ettercops are disciplined and sometimes use magic, so he gives them Willpower 3.

#### STEP 4

### FOCUSES

First, Mark gives the ettercop focuses for its main attacks: an Accuracy (Bite) focus and a Fighting (Claw) focus. He decides the giant spider's focuses all make sense for ettercops, and so gives them Constitution (Stamina), Dexterity (Stealth), Perception (Touch), Strength (Intimidation and Jumping) and Willpower (Morale) focuses. He also gives ettercops Communication (Bargaining and Deception) focuses for interacting

with characters, and Intelligence (Arcane Lore) to represent the magical knowledge the ettercops gained in the webs between worlds.

**STEP 5**

## ATTACKS

Having already established ettercops as having bite and claw attacks, Mark calculates their attack roll and damage. He imagines the monster impaling an enemy on its sharp forelegs, so he gives the claw attack 2d6+1 plus Strength damage, for a total of 2d6+4. It gets a +5 on attack rolls (Fighting plus the Claw focus). The ettercop's bite is smaller than the giant spider's, so he gives it a 1d6 plus Strength damage, for 1d6+3, and a +5 attack roll.

**STEP 6**

## SPECIAL QUALITIES

Most of the qualities of the giant spider work just fine for an ettercop. The ettercop gets exoskeleton, wall crawler, and web special qualities from the giant spider.

The ettercop should also have some ability to turn people into servants, so it gets a quality called webbed puppet. If the ettercop has a creature captured and can keep it for an hour or more, webbing it up and dosing it with venom, the creature can be forced to serve the ettercop. This quality is based on the thin man's Infectious Mind ability. Mark also decides the ettercop's venom can twist the mind of a victim in combat. He gives the ettercop Poisoned Mind as a 3-SP stunt. When the stunt is used, the target of the attack must make a **TN 14 Willpower (Self-Discipline)** test. If the victim fails, it can take only a minor action, chosen by the ettercop, on its next turn.

Finally, Mark wants the ettercop to be able to hide among humans, and so he gives it the werespider special quality, based on the bouda's Werehyena quality. This allows the ettercop to appear as a normal human, but while it's in this form, it loses its claw and bite attacks, its exoskeleton, its web, and its ability to perform the Poisoned Mind stunt. This form is much weaker, so the ettercop is unlikely to stay in this form during a fight. Mark also reminds himself to add a weapon attack for the ettercop to use when it is in human form.

As the ettercop will be able to act in human form, Mark also takes a moment to consider if it should have any talents or weapon groups. He decides against giving it any talents, but decides ettercops have the Brawling and Light Blades weapon groups.

**STEP 7**

## COMBAT TRAITS

To finish out the ettercop's game stats, Mark calculates the combat traits for the monster. The ettercop's Speed is 14. For Health, Mark decides the ettercop should be a challenge for level 7 characters. Seven plus the monster's Constitution of 3 is 10; multiplied by 5, this gives the monster 50 Health. This seems about right compared to other Moderate Threats.

ETTERCOP			
ABILITIES (FOCUSES)			
3	ACCURACY (BITE)		
2	COMMUNICATION (BARGAINING, DECEPTION)		
3	CONSTITUTION (STAMINA)		
4	DEXTERITY (STEALTH)		
3	FIGHTING (CLAW)		
4	INTELLIGENCE (ARCANE LORE)		
2	PERCEPTION (TOUCH)		
3	STRENGTH (INTIMIDATION, JUMPING)		
3	WILLPOWER (MORALE)		
SPEED	HEALTH	DEFENSE	ARMOR RATING
14	50	14	4
WEAPON	ATTACK ROLL	DAMAGE	
BITE	+5	1D6+3	
CLAW	+5	2D6+4	
SHORT SWORD	+3	1D6+5	
SPECIAL QUALITIES			
<b>FAVORED STUNTS:</b> Knockdown, Poisoned Mind (3 SP), Skirmish			
<b>EXOSKELETON:</b> The tough exoskeleton of an ettercop gives it an Armor Rating of 4.			
<b>POISONED MIND STUNT:</b> An ettercop can inject a mind-altering poison into the target of its attack as a special stunt costing 3 SP. The victim must make a <b>TN 14 Willpower (Self-Discipline)</b> test. If the creature fails, on its next turn it gets no major action, and its minor action is chosen by the ettercop.			
<b>WALL CRAWLER:</b> An ettercop can walk up walls and along ceilings with no penalty.			
<b>WEB:</b> As a major action, an ettercop can shoot a web at a visible enemy within 12 yards. The target must make a successful <b>TN 12 Dexterity (Acrobatics)</b> test or become immobilized. The target or an ally can free the victim by taking a major action and making a successful <b>TN 14 Strength (Might)</b> test. This is the only action the immobilized character can take until freed.			
<b>WEBBED PUPPET:</b> Given time, an ettercop can break down the will of other creatures, turning them into servants of the ettercop's agenda. If the ettercop has a victim captured for an hour or more, it can bind the creature in its webbing and administer multiple doses of its mind-altering venom. The creature must make a <b>TN 14 Willpower (Self-Discipline)</b> test. A creature that fails the test becomes the ettercop's servant and acts under the ettercop's orders and in its best interests. An affected creature can make another <b>TN 14 Willpower (Self-Discipline)</b> test every morning and each time it has to do something it would normally find repulsive or self-destructive.			
<b>WERESPIDER:</b> The ettercop can change to a human form, or back to its spider form, with an Activate action. While in human form, the ettercop loses its bite and claw attacks, its exoskeleton and web special qualities, and its Poisoned Mind stunt.			
<b>WEAPON GROUPS:</b> Brawling, Light Blades			
THREAT: MODERATE			

WEB-BOUND PUPPETS			
ABILITIES (FOCUSES)			
2	ACCURACY		
0	COMMUNICATION		
3	CONSTITUTION		
1	DEXTERITY (STEALTH)		
2	FIGHTING (BLUDGEONS, HEAVY BLADES)		
0	INTELLIGENCE		
1	PERCEPTION (SEARCHING)		
3	STRENGTH (INTIMIDATION)		
1	WILLPOWER (MORALE)		
SPEED	HEALTH	DEFENSE	ARMOR RATING
11	20	11	2
WEAPON	ATTACK ROLL	DAMAGE	
LONGSWORD	+4	2D6+3	
MAUL	+4	1D6+6	
SPECIAL QUALITIES			
<b>FAVORED STUNTS:</b> Knock Prone, Mighty Blow			
<b>FANATICAL CONDITIONING:</b> The web-bound puppet has a +2 bonus to any rolls to resist effects causing fear or trying to convince them to act against the ettercop's orders.			
<b>FOULING WEB STUNT:</b> When attacking an opponent in melee, the web-bound puppet may use the Fouling Web stunt for 2 SP. The target of the stunt suffers a -2 penalty to Accuracy, Fighting, and damage for any melee attacks until the end of the encounter, or until they spend a major action cleaning their weapon.			
<b>SPIDER-SILK ARMORING:</b> The webbing binding the puppet provides an Armor Rating of 2.			
<b>WEAPON GROUPS:</b> Bludgeons, Brawling, Heavy Blades, Light Blades, Staves			
THREAT: MINOR			

The ettercop's Defense is the same as its Speed, at 14. For the Armor Rating, the Exoskeleton quality gives the monster an Armor Rating of 4.

## LAST STEPS

At this point, Mark takes a look at the finished statistics for the ettercop.

Looking this over, the ettercop seems to fit the concept Mark had for it quite well!

Mark decides he should also have some statistics made up for the victims of the ettercops' mind control. He imagines mind-controlled soldiers throwing themselves fearlessly at the heroes, still mostly wrapped in the spider webs they were bound in. Creatures sent out as agents of the ettercops are mostly still intact, but he imagines these poor people being turned into fanatic foot soldiers.

He thinks of these web-bound puppets as Minor Threats. Their ability to hit should be about average for someone in

WEB-BOUND TEMPLATE
Enemies with this template have been captured and conditioned by ettercops. They serve the ettercops as fanatically loyal warriors and guardians.
Make the following changes to an existing adversary:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increase Strength and Constitution by 1.</li> <li>• Reduce Intelligence and Communication by 1.</li> <li>• Add 10 Health.</li> <li>• Add the Willpower (Morale) focus.</li> <li>• Increase Armor Rating by 2.</li> <li>• Add the Fanatical Conditioning and Fouling Web Stunt qualities.</li> </ul>
<b>FANATICAL CONDITIONING:</b> The web-bound puppet has a +2 bonus to any rolls to resist effects causing fear or trying to convince them to act against the ettercops' orders.
<b>FOULING WEB STUNT:</b> When attacking an opponent in melee, the web-bound puppet may use the Fouling Web stunt for 2 SP. The target of the stunt suffers a -2 penalty to Accuracy, Fighting, and damage for any melee attacks until the end of the encounter, or until they spend a major action cleaning their weapon.

a fight, so he gives them Accuracy 2 and Fighting 2, as well as the Heavy Blades focus. He wants them to have a higher than normal Constitution and Strength, showing their willingness to fight beyond what normal enemies would, so he gives them a 3 in both abilities. To further support that theme, he also gives them the Willpower (Morale) focus. However, the harshness of the mind-control conditioning has left them with a 0 in both Communication and Intelligence. Finally, he adds a few additional appropriate focuses to increase the monsters' effectiveness and accentuate their strengths.

Considering special qualities for these adversaries, he decides they should have some sort of bonus to resist fear and intimidation effects, as well as any form of mind-control other than the ettercop's influence. The webbing they are still wrapped in gives them some armor. In addition, he decides it would be fun if the webbing could potentially foul up the blades of those attacking the web-bound puppets. He decides to give them a stunt which can reduce the attack and damage of a target until the target switches weapons or takes an action to clean their weapon off.

Finally, he calculates the combat traits of his new monster. Its Speed and Defense are both 11, its Health is 20, and the Armor Rating for the web-bound puppets is 2.

Looking over the web-bound puppet, everything looks good. But, Mark thinks, what if the ettercops take control of some other creature to use as shock troops, instead of just using humans? He decides to create a template for "web-bound" creatures, giving them bonuses to Strength and Constitution, penalties to Intelligence and Communication, and the special qualities he came up with for the web-bound puppet.

# VARIANT MONSTERS

Facing the same monsters over and over can be boring, and that's the last thing that any *Fantasy AGE* encounter should be. Often an adversary can be made more exciting or unusual by modifying their abilities and special qualities. The *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* talks about how to do this with focused intent, helping GMs create berserker trolls or giant space vampires. However, sometimes a GM wants or needs a random bit of inspiration for a new or variant adversary for a campaign, adventure, or encounter. For these times, use the following tables combined with the **Modifying Monsters** section of the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* to create new variations of classic threats.

The most basic version of changing adversaries works with the **Beefing Up Adversaries** section of the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary*. All that is required is a roll on the **Beefiness** table to randomly determine the adversary's power level. Reference the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* for details on how to apply modifications to elite, heroic, and epic adversaries if it's indicated.

For more sophisticated random modifications, roll on the **Number of Modifications** table to determine how many abilities to add to an adversary, then roll on the **Adversary Modifiers** table that number of times. Apply all those results to the creature. Descriptions of these modifiers are all found in the

*Fantasy AGE Bestiary*. If you roll the same modifier twice, it's your choice whether to increase the power of that feature, or re-roll for a new result.

For a really powerful upgrade of an adversary, combine the two methods above.

## MODIFICATION CAVEATS

Modifications applied to creatures should come with associated traits, affectations, or distinctive features. Sometimes these features should be obvious, such as exceptional size or an extra head. Other times a modification suggests more subtle physical changes, such as a burrowing creature whose claws are thicker and tougher-looking than normal.

GMs should consider the use of these last two tables carefully. At a bare minimum the resulting adversary will have one modification rated at normal power, though the results can be far more dramatic. Also, these tables don't usually generate monsters with more than three special qualities; GMs who want to apply more should feel free to do so, but be aware too many new abilities and affectations on the same creature can become hard to track or distracting in play.

BEEFINESS	
D6	RESULT
1-2	Normal
3-4	Elite
5	Heroic
6	Epic

NUMBER OF MODIFICATIONS	
D6	RESULT
1-2	One
3-4	Two
5	Three
6	Two plus Special. Take an unusual special quality from another adversary and apply it (Medusa's Petrifying Gaze, spectre's Chilling Touch, etc...)

ADVERSARY MODIFIERS		
D6	D6	RESULT
1	1	Agile
	2	Amphibious
	3	Aquatic
	4	Armored
	5	Berserker
	6	Big
2	1	Blending
	2	Burrowing
	3	Clawed
	4	Clockwork
	5	Darkvision
	6	Giant-Sized
3	1	Eldritch
	2	Elemental Resistance
	3	Fae
	4	Fanged
	5	Fast
	6	Feral

D6	D6	RESULT
4	1	Holy
	2	Magic Resistance
	3	Many-Headed
	4	Mighty
	5	Pack Advantage
	6	Piercing
5	1	Regenerate
	2	Shadow
	3	Shifting
	4	Small
	5	Space
	6	Spectral
6	1	Spectral Attack
	2	Sunblighted
	3	Unholy
	4	Vulnerability
	5	Winged
	6	Roll twice more and apply both modifiers



## BUILDING THE DIVINE

**D**eveloping the religions of your world is an important step in building your setting. Even if your campaign has nothing directly concerning the topic, even if your players are not playing any sort of devout characters, the undeniable influences and bonds of shared beliefs influence the world. Faiths and creation myths shape a setting and breathe life and purpose into it. One can find great allies—and terrifying enemies—in practitioners of and believers in the divine.

### USING COSMIC ENTITIES

Just like the frameworks discussed in **CHAPTER 1: BUILDING THE CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK**, understanding and developing the architecture for your setting's faiths can help you define your world. A person's faith is often deeply tied to how they view the world. Religion can define a person's—or even an entire nation's—sense of right and wrong, can set expectations for individuals' actions, and can pre-establish one's relationship to a location and its inhabitants. The power of belief is a source of hope for some, while in others it inspires fear, awe, or trembling rage. Very few concepts so quickly unify or create conflict as faith and religion.

The religions in your campaign may take the forms of tales and stories, or they may be a mix of histories and learning opportunities turned to fables over eons. Great gods can be historical heroes and villains, or they can just as easily turn into a means to an end, a lesson taught to shape society through time.

Whether or not you use a framework to build your pantheons, and regardless of the level of complexity that you ultimately add to them, the mere existence of beliefs and creation myths adds flavor and color to your campaign world. *Fantasy AGE* removes the requirement of tying any character class to a faith, alignment-based belief system, or pantheon; you are free to make your adventures as faith-themed or as atheistic as you want. Your players won't have to worry about the mechanical requirements for faith-based healers or other religious heroes. You and your players retain control and story autonomy while still enjoying such classic adventure elements as fighting demon lords or going up against the fanatic devotees of an ancient and evil god.

Depending on the kind of story you are telling, your setting might have different perspectives on or uses for religions. One setting may offer a warm and casual existence to its believers, where one may wear one's faith openly without fear of persecution or cultural expectations. Another may be so steeped in religious fervor that there is no escaping theological conflicts and cultural influence. Yet another may be so devoid of religion that the faithful are considered renegades and must worship their beloved creators in secret or risk punishment.

In many settings, all these examples and more are true, depending on where in the campaign world you are. Consider these possibilities and their repercussions; all of these can help you bring extra adventure and excitement into your setting. Just like real-world societies are shaped by the sharing of stories, so too will any living, breathing environment have histories and faiths rooted in their own tales and shared lessons.

# DESIGNING DEITIES

How do you create a god? How do you design pantheons? Given the range of real-world religious examples and the vast array of options for creating your own, it can be difficult to decide what you want; too many choices can be just as paralyzing as too few.

The easiest way to work through developing your setting's pantheon is to simply break your choices into smaller pieces through exploration.

## FINDING ANSWERS BY ASKING QUESTIONS

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One way to narrow down your deific designs is to ask yourself questions or challenge a notion you have.

### CAN YOU USE EXISTING INSPIRATION?

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Never be afraid to look through actual history and mythology for inspiration. Is there a religious structure or framework that might fit your campaign theme or help convey the flavor of your environments?

Many renowned RPG settings requisitioned names and concepts from real-world myths and shaped them into new creations. For example, Quetzalcoatl was the Aztec god of wind and learning before the name was shortened and the serpent became a widely-used creature of a totally different scale. Tiamat, too, was once the Sumerian goddess of salt-water seas and primordial, chaotic creation before being reshaped and reborn as one of the gaming world's most iconic evil deities.

If history or mythology aren't helping you discover an idea, the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* is another great place to find inspiration. In fact, many of the creatures in that book come from real-world myths and legends, such as the amarak and the grootslang.

Remember that you do not have to base your pantheon or your adversaries on already-established creatures, nor need you approximate statistics from other systems or settings. The fact that you can is one of the beauties of this system, but using a new pantheon based on a historical figure might pose an additional, fun challenge to your players, instead of the old tried-and-true archetypes many more-experienced players have come to expect. Imagine the surprise on your players' faces when you tell them they have come face to face with Tiamat—but instead of a dragon, your heroes face down a powerful creature made purely of water and chaotic, swirling tempests!

### HOW REAL ARE YOUR DEITIES?

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Are your gods undoubtedly real, or are they merely characters in a myth from ages past? Are they powerful people who no longer live, or are they the literal forces of nature?

Figuring out the reality of your pantheon is important because it informs societal norms, reactions to the topic, and the practice of that religion.

Consider the attitude your NPCs have toward religion when they know for a fact their gods are real, perhaps even walking among them. Compare that to the attitude of NPCs who have no proof of their deities' existence, and must instead rely upon faith and belief. How would the world be shaped in each circumstance? How would each religion's rites and traditions differ from one another?

### HOW PRESENT ARE YOUR GODS?

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It's important to understand that just because you have created the truth of your setting, the world's population does *not* need to be aware of that reality. A particular pantheon may be real, but the inhabitants of the world might not know it. Contrarily, a community may believe they see evidence of the gods all around them, when in reality their world has no deific presence. The important thing is that you, the GM, know the truth.

If you have opted to have your pantheon be a true presence in your setting, your next consideration should be to figure out just how involved they are in the worlds they control.

Ask yourself the following questions:

- Are the gods always present and watching?
- Are they conspicuously absent? If so, why?
- Have they been angered or tricked into ignoring or otherwise abandoning the world? If so, how might they ever return? Would they need to be coerced? Do they need to be rescued—and, if so, how does one rescue a deity? And who or what is so powerful that they have endangered a god to begin with?

Considering these options is very important, because it focuses how the inhabitants of your world are going to view the practices and topics of faith.

For example, if your pantheon is real and walking among the populace, you might ask the following questions:

- What religious rituals are used to worship the gods?
- How would an average NPC view the topic of religion?
- How would a dedicated priest of a given faith be viewed?
- What might each deity need from its worshippers, and how would those requirements affect those who didn't follow that particular god?
- How would religious traditions be handed down between generations? Would the gods' needs change over the years?

In contrast, you should also consider what happens to a society when their guiding pantheon used to be present, but has since disappeared. How do *those* NPCs live their lives and practice their faith? What would their attitude be toward other faiths—especially faiths whose gods were still undeniably present?

## GODS & MONSTERS

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Give consideration to what sort of opposing gods or forces exist in your setting—angels and demons, beings of light and dark, demons and devils, and so on. If there is opposition to your gods, what form does it take? Does it have a structure or hierarchy?

If you are considering having angels, demons, or cosmic or extraplanar beings as a physical, tangible presence in your world, consider how their existence affects everything. For example, you may need to consider what other planes of existence there are in your world. Simple answers may serve you the best here. Remember, it does not matter if the inhabitants know these answers; in fact, it lends realism to your setting if they don't. But if you know even the basic answers to these questions, it will add credibility and immersion to your stories.

For an added challenge, consider how else you might twist or subvert established traits and tropes. Instead of making seducer demons the sly face of your demonic order, for example, you could make them the lowest, most reviled tier. Perhaps this is why they are so good at communication—it's the only skill they can leverage in their quest for more power.

Perhaps, rather than existing in opposition to gods, demonic or infernal forces exert unusual dominance in the mortal world due to exceptional circumstances. This could lead to creatures traditionally meant to fill a role in a hellish realm or plane of evil and corruption filling a totally different niche in your campaign. Perhaps an assassin demon was bound into pursuing multiple targets it ultimately could not destroy, stranding it in the mortal realm under the bonds of an impossible task. Bereft of purpose or a way home, it decided, either on its own or through some other influential manipulation, to claim ownership of a sickened land. This demon ruler now sits on a throne, furious at its very existence, and plots to sacrifice the entire nation in a desperate attempt to earn a way back home.

You will find plenty of good ideas, as well as important advice on how to customize your demons, in the *Bestiary*. And remember, just because your setting has one kind of demon doesn't mean you are required to use them all. What does it say about your world if you have only assassin demons? Did the others ever exist? If so, what happened to them?

## EVER-PRESENT WITHOUT WORDS

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Regardless of the deities' tangible presence in the world, in most settings divine influence is accepted as part of daily life by a notable percentage of the populace. Even in settings lacking concrete proof of the divine, belief in higher powers and divine forces drives people in various ways, from daily rituals to lifetime goals. This illustrates that your gods do not need to be constantly present in order to point your adventurers towards the next great threat or important goal.

Religion throughout history has been a powerful influence on what societies see as right and wrong. Even the existence of a belief system in a setting will influence the way in which your heroes and others view the world around them. People don't need gods to be physically present, pointing them toward proper choices, because the structures are already in place to tell followers what their gods wish of them: how to treat others, what is truly right and wrong, and so forth.

You need not subscribe to a religion at all to have a sense of right or wrong. However, many religions are so deeply ingrained into society that some people cannot fathom how those who do not share their faith could possibly understand those basic pillars of social morality. This creates potentially

disruptive but interesting character conflicts, from friendly debate to zealotry and violence.

There is also the question of why people follow the gods' edicts and moral views. Do they hold a profound love for these higher beings? Are they motivated by fear of their gods' anger or punishment? And are these rules set down by the divine denied or reviled by others who reject or even seek to undermine them? Historically, all these things have been true to varying degrees, with the faithful following their gods out of a mix of love and fear while others reject them. These conflicts often manifest in mortal cultures, causing everything from treatises on morality penned by respected theologians to holy wars.

Gods, angels, demons, and devils are also often represented in art. From classic works to popular fare, music, painting, sculpture, poetry, and other mediums of expression, the arts regularly draw inspiration from the divine. In this way, gods often spread to other cultures or impact even those who don't believe in their existence. A famed painting of the fall of a god may not inspire a monarch to convert his people, but he might still place it in his gallery, and future artists may seek to emulate its style and themes.

Taken all together, these considerations show how the gods and their followers need neither be conspicuous nor ubiquitous in a campaign setting to influence your players' characters or the world around them. Perhaps a deity shows an adventurer the way through a series of signs, hidden agents, or prophetic dreams. Perhaps the more a character proves themselves a loyal servant of a deity, the more they can see or understand the gods' subtle influences. Perhaps the tales of forgotten gods adorn the murals of a great city as decoration, even though none who live there pray to them for guidance.

There are no right or wrong answers to these questions—they are merely possibilities a Game Master can consider as they build their religions.

## HISTORY AS THEMATIC INSPIRATION

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Looking at our own world's history is an easy way to get fast inspiration for your games. In studying religions and other myths of the past, we can see patterns meant to define familial life or assuage fears over natural disasters.

This latter point is especially tantalizing for a GM to consider. For example, if a flood affects a city, people of one religion might swear the anger of a warlike god caused it, punishing wrongdoers and those who eschew the faith. Another faith might attribute that same flood to an overabundant blessing from a nature deity. A third may simply label the event a natural disaster mortals must endure as part of the price they pay for the gift of life the gods give them.

A frequent theme throughout historical religions and pantheistic beliefs is the concept of many related gods, some of whom are directly related either through marriage, birth, or other forms of family bonds. Warring siblings, loving spouses, and wayward children all exist in the pantheons of the world. Hereditary links between gods and goddesses are a way to make them more relatable, as well as a source for divine drama that may echo among their followers. The

priests of twin gods may be close allies, friendly rivals, or filled with bitter resentment for each other, depending on how their patron deities interact. The followers of a mother goddess may automatically revere her husband or children as well, or they may recognize their divinity but refuse to pay homage to her family.

Other themes within pantheons include generational families overthrowing or otherwise conquering their parents or ancestors. The destruction of parents to claim or create the world for themselves and future generations is another story often visited in history. For example, in Norse creation myths, Odin and his brothers conquered Ymir and formed the world from his remains. In Greek mythology, Cronus devoured his own children to keep them from usurping him, an act which led to his overthrow by Zeus.

Many familial and elemental pantheons serve to bring order, reassurance, and understanding to an otherwise chaotic or uncertain life. Pantheon-worshipping societies often see individual worshipers dedicated specifically to one or two gods but giving respect and praise to the pantheon as a whole, since each god in that particular belief system controls a different aspect of a person's life.

Using similar themes in GM-crafted pantheons evokes these real-world mythologies, making them relatable and familiar. Followers of certain gods may emulate their divinities, which has a great effect on the societies, nations, and religions devoted to them.

## DIVINE VARIATIONS

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Some faiths have multiple gods to represent one theme. For example, instead of having one god to encompass the feeling of love, what if your setting has many? You might have one god representing passionate love and its emotional extremes, another who embodies love from a parental standpoint, and another who holds power over aesthetic love. If you separate those concepts, how would it change the world and its population?

Another important thing to consider is humanity's place in the universe and its relationship to the divine. Here, again, history can help you to see your options. Christianity has a single god who bestows life and power to humanity, setting its place in the world as master and controller (and sometimes namer) of the animals. The gods of Egypt were the rulers of humanity, and divinity passed through blood into their pharaohs—living gods—setting humans as rulers over the world.

In our world, we see many cultures or ethnicities whose deities tell them they are unique among the people of the world. In fantasy settings, this same concept often leads to various fantasy races likely having their own gods, or at least their own versions of various gods. Do these people believe themselves favored by the gods? Or are they perhaps singled out for special punishment, responsibilities, or a particular role in some future event? Answering these questions can help make “the god of the elves” and similar beings more interesting than simply being the divinity associated with a particular fantasy heritage.

With sufficient secular power or magical might, some mortals are believed to become the gods themselves. This usually





A good Game Master will prepare a setting that makes sense to them. This setting may have many gods and demons, only one, or any number of options in between. But you should also consider the option of the nonbeliever in your party, and give some thought to how other characters may react.

If you are building a world in which the gods are real, physical beings able to manifest at will, what does it say about a person who is deliberately atheistic? The answer likely lies in the dictionary definition of the term “atheist”: one who does not believe in the gods or divine powers. This doesn’t mean such a character would believe that an immensely powerful interdimensional being that showed up and started slinging thunderbolts was just a shared delusion or fake. They simply wouldn’t believe that being was a god or divine. They rationally explain the “gods” as aliens, extradimensional beings of vast power, or former heroes made immortal and powerful by strange science or magic.

And in some settings? They may be completely correct.

results in religious factions or orders rising up to protect or even control these divine mortals. For example, the devout followers in Nepal welcome their goddess of divine feminine energy, Kumari Devi, through a living child—a little girl who is never permitted to leave her home save to be seen at a holy festival, whose feet may never touch the ground, and whose deific status is believed to depart when she first menstruates to seek out another unblooded child. By contrast, the pharaohs of Egypt’s alleged divinity allowed them incredible power over their kingdom, with few limitations and a vast infrastructure devoted to serving them.

Other religions favor nature’s rule over the rule of humankind; the Sumerian pantheon, for example, gives nature precedence over human actions and experiences. Other beliefs, such as Native American myths, convey lessons learned from nature and favor a pointedly harmonious existence, bringing a balance between the human and animal realms.

These different focuses and concepts can be mixed and combined in a campaign setting to create a number of conflicting or complimentary religious structures.

## DIVINE MYSTERIES

Does your religion have its own forgotten mysteries or secret practices lost to time? The Egyptian people thousands of years ago erased from history the names and faces of great offenders, ensuring neither their successors nor the community would ever remember them. When Christianity started its great bloom into Roman rulership, the gods and their temples, having already changed from the Greek pantheon to the Roman, suddenly found no home at all. Statues and architecture were deliberately defaced, melted down, or otherwise destroyed to make way for a new faith. Has anything like this happened in your world? How would that affect the stories and adventures you make?

Divine mysteries make excellent fodder for plot hooks and adventures in *Fantasy AGE* campaigns. A lost prophecy or heretic text is a fantastic way to bring a religion dynamically into a campaign arc, especially if it leads the heroes on a grand adventure. An ancient revelation uncovered in a ruin or tomb about a religion could make characters targets, prophets, heroes, or villains, depending on who you ask. These developments are generally of great interest to religiously minded PCs in particular, but there is adventure, danger, and profit in uncovering religious mysteries, artifacts, and secrets even for the unbeliever—just ask Indiana Jones.

## CHALLENGES OF THE FAITH

Encouraging drama and character tension is easy when it comes to discussions of faith. Religions are so deeply a part of our histories and our societies that people can be brought to the most selfless highs or the most dastardly lows, all in the name of their god.

Wars between religions are commonplace. Disagreements of religious natures have caused amazing amounts of destruction all throughout our history. Temples have been destroyed and great cities reduced to rubble, leaving only ruined husks to hint at what life may have been like or what those lost civilizations valued. Often these conflicts have more tangible causes as well, such a desire for imperialistic expansion or territory disputes, but religion is often used to incite and motivate the citizenry when the enemies hold a different faith. *Fantasy AGE* settings with active and established religions almost certainly have a few similar conflicts in their history.

Adventurers do not need to follow any sort of religion or have any direct relationship with a faith for conflicts of this nature to arise. Zealots of a faith can easily come into direct or indirect conflict with each other. Sometimes this might happen at a local festival or a family event gone wrong; something as simple as who should be pouring the wine or giving away the bride at a prestigious wedding could lead to feuding and violence. At other times, faith-based conflict or tension might grow slowly in the background of your world, to the point that nations come into conflict regardless of whether or not your heroes are involved.

Sometimes these conflicts take place within the same religion, as branches of faithful followers come into conflict with each other. A nature goddess might be all about life and growth and green places, or she might be interpreted to have a focus on balance, or even to focus on mold and decay and an end to life so as to sustain the next. What happens when believers of the same come into conflict like this?

Of course, confrontations like this do not have to be on a broad scale. They can also be a fantastic source of character conflict and development, even within the ranks of your party. What happens when one of your protagonists follows a religion that is the antithesis of another’s faith? This does not have to end in the party exploding; heroes united in purpose—and most parties agree on doing the right thing and saving the day—might all uphold that common goal but have different ways

of going about it. What happens when your party is united in purpose, but the steps to get there create conflict between two or more of the characters?

## DESIGNING CULTS & RELIGIONS

When you look at the scope and breadth of creating a brand-new religion, it can be daunting. Building a god is not the same as building the practice of worship around it, and what you thought might be a simple task may grow in complexity when you realize how many details you might have to consider.

The time spent designing your faiths will not only lend an air of realism and added depth to your setting, but it will also enable you to create more immersive environments, encounters, and adventures. In terms of detail, your contentment is key: do as much or as little work as needed to make your religions serve your needs. Different GMs require different levels of intricacy to accomplish their goals, and there is no one way to do it. Just make sure what you're creating suits your setting, your world, and the game you and your players want to play.

Whichever path you choose, you may be faced with a lot of choices you're unaccustomed to. By breaking them down into underlying concepts or even "sub-frameworks," you can more easily find your way through this stage of world-building.

## ERRANT GODS & THE PEOPLE WHO LOVE THEM

Every now and again, we can all enjoy a light-hearted adventure with easy obstacles and unchallenging adversaries. Sometimes, this occasional "easy sweep" will not only invigorate a tired party of heroes (or players!), but set them on track toward larger adventures. Eventually, however, a group will grow tired of waves of relentless, unthinking minions or stumbling, dumbed-down adversaries. A realistic setting has realistic adversaries; there is no reason an evil overlord would intentionally surround himself with tactless, easily defeated minions. Of course, that doesn't mean it can't happen, but it should be due to actual reasons in the setting, not just to give the PCs an easy win.

This concept is the same no matter the person in charge. Just as a good king will want to protect himself thoroughly, the high priest of an evil god will want to do the same. Keep this in mind as you continue to flesh out your world and the powers, hierarchies, and adversaries that shape it. Cultists and other followers of divinities might be obsessive zealots, but they're usually not pushovers.

So how do you design your religions and adversarial cults to make them seem more realistic? Keeping in mind that religious doctrine is often taught through the power of storytelling, your own favorite stories are a great place to start. Was there ever a character in a movie you wished you could flesh out? A plotline in a book you felt you could do better? A location from a video game in which you wished you could spend more time?

You can pull inspiration from even the most random of places: a cool picture of a monster you found on the internet, a favorite NPC from a long-forgotten game, even listening to a beloved piece of music. Turning these random elements into the basis of a religion or a cult is as simple as asking yourself one question: "What if people worshipped this?"

Historical studies are a fantastic way to start, if adding realism is your goal. Think about the lives of ordinary people throughout the time period you want to emulate. What kinds of lives did those people lead? Did their geography end up influencing their beliefs? What about your setting's societies? People often created pantheons of gods from a need to understand the world around them—what exists in the environments of your nations that could spark such a phenomenon?

Your religion could have many different branches of belief extending from the core faith. For example, look at Christianity. Millions and millions of faithful worshippers believe in this particular mythology, but there are no fewer than 12 major denominations of this core belief! You can certainly take a few lessons and questions from this and apply them to your own world. Does your primary religion claim only one main faith, or are there multiple denominations? If so, how many, and where do they branch? Where do they agree, and where do they stray the farthest from each other?

Because there are religious details peppered throughout our everyday lives, it makes sense that these considerations are allowed to exist and be a realistic detail for your campaigns. There is very little that is not exposed in some way to the dominant religion of an area. Faith is everywhere—in art, in music, and in law. For example, while not everyone in the United States may believe in a Christian god, the American dollar bears the slogan "In God We Trust." In much of the country, children routinely recite the Pledge of Allegiance, promising to be loyal citizens of their country, "one nation under God," before they understand what it means. This is an important lesson: even the most atheistic character will still be able to recognize the art and at least some of the music from religions they do not practice.

Another consideration is that some icons may have different meanings for different faiths and people. For example, our own world has a well-loved and many-named symbol that originated in the Neolithic period, discovered in the Ukraine and first thought to be a fertility symbol. Over many thousands of years, its meaning and name changed and grew, and it was a celebrated symbol of the universe and good luck long before an infamous hate group claimed the swastika for themselves in the 1920s.

### FRIENDLY RIVALRIES

While religious conflict is a great source of role-playing opportunity and dramatic tension, GMs and players should remember that it's a game and they're supposed to be having fun. Thus it is just as important to sometimes scale back religious themes or conflict as it is to ramp them up. Also, just because two characters' gods are enemies doesn't mean the characters have to be, though it likely makes for some interesting chats around the campfire during adventures.

## LOVE THY NEIGHBOR OR SMITE THY ENEMY?

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In developing your religions, consider who worships your deities and how the faithful might react to the adventures you plan for your campaign. Some sects may openly welcome travelers and allow anyone of any faith to seek shelter and healing within their walls. Others may be very selective about who they allow past their threshold or into their halls. Still others are so dedicated to their sworn cause that they greet nonbelievers with unhidden hostility. Consider how your religion views its “chosen” people and the other people around them. Some faiths may take an egalitarian approach, while others might encourage insular or otherwise selective attitudes. As a religion is practiced through the ages, through writing or through oral storytelling tradition, there lies a potential for some of its original messages to be lost, forgotten, or modified to speak to a modern society. Sacred writings may be modified or rewritten in order to support a particular environment or people—or, in darker cases, to manipulate followers into obeying the whims and rules of nefarious leaders. Over centuries, a once-inclusive religion can be twisted to ensure one race or creature is favored over another, normalizing intolerance through devotion. Perhaps a religion promises to grant a group of worshipers a beautiful heaven or utopian world-state, but only *after* a particular race is exterminated or a conflicting religion is eliminated.

Religion also shows up in politics. The dominant beliefs prevalent within a given society are often one of the first points of connection between a ruler and their people. You only have to look to real-world politics for inspiration here: Would your heroes help a ruler to power if they openly opposed the character’s religion or did not share certain core tenets?

Deciding how your religions have treated one another historically and currently interact can help you gain some clarity and plant some fantastic adventure seeds, either as background color to your scenes or as a more immediate adventure or story arc. In most cases, a religion has individuals who interpret their faith quite differently. A fanatical priest might hunt nonbelievers, while a devout shopkeeper and their family might hide those the priest hunts. These conflicts add drama and depth to adventures and encounters featuring religions and their followers.

## TRAPPINGS OF FAITH

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As mentioned earlier, one does not have to be born into or practice a religion to have at least a familiarity with some of the more prominent features of that belief system. Many of us living today can at least recognize Christmas tunes, if not hum or sing along. Whether or not we believe in that particular deity, most of us see a cross, a star, or even a pentagram hanging on a necklace and know that the wearer follows a particular faith and set of rules and standards—even if we do not know the details or truth of those rules and standards.

Apply these observations to your own setting. Do the followers of your setting’s faiths learn their lessons through holy writing, song, or interpretive dance? Are there particular symbols, animals, or times of the day that are especially beloved to your god? What about preferred tools? What

rituals and community events are special to your gods? Where do the faithful gather to worship, and how do they properly worship that deity? Are there individual prayers to be offered in addition to community prayers, much as someone might both pray before bedtime and attend church once a week?

Are there any new or additional phrases, expressions, or exclamations that have come from your setting’s religion? For example, if you have developed Arshin the Fire-Forged as a god in your world, then it makes sense when his worshipers use phrases particular to that element. An angry warrior might bellow a war cry of “Feel my fire!” while a healer might coo, “Let Arshin’s tenderness warm you.”

Are your god’s followers encouraged, permitted, or even required to sport any open “declarations” of faith? What are the implications of those trappings? Maybe followers of Arshin the Fire-Forged are openly encouraged, but not required, to wear his flame symbol or to incorporate his favored metals into pendants and wedding bands. Meanwhile Jarolyn, the private, secretive god of shadows, thieves, and lies, considers it a punishable offense to wear any visible sign of affiliation. In direct opposition, Ul’zad the Warbringer insists that all of his followers, true scions of blade and blood, be ritually scarified with a prominent mark—and threatens removal of that body part if the bearer ever strays from his faith.

The subtle shift of a fantasy stereotype can be a fantastic challenge to your players. For example, if you describe a big, burly orc with a ritual scar-tattoo of Ul’zad the Warbringer, your heroes should, most likely, be ready for a loud and bloody confrontation. But what if that same orc, instead of a scar, has a dainty, golden band around his neck, adorned with the twisting vines and flowers of Mahre, the keeper of crops, the mother of all nature?

These are just some examples of a few gods. You can find tables to help you randomly generate your own ideas at the end of this chapter. If those aren’t enough, you can find additional names and ideas in *AGE Explorations: Gifts of the Gods*, and using random generators found online can very easily provide you with many more. Your players may also express an interest in helping you to create gods; sometimes a collaboration can lead to exciting ideas that you might not have discovered on your own.

## THE MAGIC OF BELIEF

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As previously established, one of the things that sets *Fantasy AGE* apart from other traditional roleplaying games is that religion is not inherently tied to any sort of magic. For some creators, it might be a tremendous boon to have the additional freedom to explore characters and situations that might have been mechanically impossible in other systems and situations. Others may find themselves missing the structure and ease of advancement that players might expect.

The beauty of the *Fantasy AGE* system is in its potential for customization. Your players are not required to play a religious character in order to play a faith-based healer, nor are they forced into a religion if they want a character to focus on destroying undead.

The game world where a priest can lose their faith and their magic but still be effective as a character is rarely explored,

often due to the long-standing tradition of tying those characters to a set alignment or game mechanic. Nobody wants to play the fallen paladin who is rediscovering his faith if the game mechanic punishes the character's overall effectiveness. Traditional paladins face this challenge all the time, forced to choose between story and game effectiveness; with the *Fantasy AGE* rules, though, you can finally, happily, have both. A paladin can follow the creed of their belief without their player feeling forced into an unwavering worldview and stance.

Moreover, this freedom allows a Game Master to explore faith-based character arcs within a campaign. Story seeds can be questions of faith: a deeply spiritual character grappling with questions of why horrible things happen to good people, or an atheist finding faith when it appears all is lost.

Some religions welcome the use of magic as a divine gift, proof that their gods exist. Others fear magic, and sometimes for the exact same reason: because it is horrible and tangible proof that the mortal races are lesser or in positions of subordination or powerlessness. Some religions are so uncomfortable with the idea that the treatment of mages becomes the most contentious point of the belief, and the subject of many wars. Look again at the treatment of mages in *Dragon Age*: Depending on where the characters live, they might see magic users reviled, imprisoned, forced into servitude under the auspice of religious right, or revered as true saviors of the land.

How does magic tie into your setting and its religions? What would happen if your heroes embarked on a quest to save an artifact that proves the existence of a deity thought long dead? Your heroes may find themselves on an adventure broader than expected, and with world-shaking consequences. The faithful worshippers of the long-dead god would likely support the heroes in their quest, because it would bring concrete proof their god is alive and unkillable—that is, unless their religion is run by heretics who warped an ancient belief system to suit their own greedy desires. In this case, your heroes may find themselves hunted by the supposed worshippers of the god they're trying to save. Meanwhile, maybe this artifact is something that the world's current rulers do not want to have found, for equally selfish reasons: proving the old god still lives might weaken the authority of mere mortals, or usher in a change of regime. Suddenly, what started as a treasure hunt is now a continent-spanning race to change a world!

From a mechanical standpoint, there are several options you can use if you want to tie your world's religions into your magic systems. You might choose to have certain restrictions or allowances; maybe certain arcana may be taught or learned only by certain tiers of faithful clergy, or maybe there are forbidden schools of magic that no priest must ever consider, lest they lose their faith.

A different option would be to allow anyone to learn any kind of arcana, but allow priests to specialize and study to the point that they gain some sort of additional bonus or focus. The **Rewards** chapter of this book discusses several new ways to compensate characters, and this kind of benefit may be an interesting option. Maybe there are thematic weapons that bestow focuses or otherwise grant some sort of divine ability or bonus to wielders of the faith. Perhaps such a weapon might scale its reward according to how immersed in the religion a character is, or perhaps it is secretly a way for a divinity

to guide its faithful. Perhaps, unbeknownst to the hero, the weapon is constantly watching and judging—and rewarding or punishing them accordingly.

Don't be afraid to take inspiration from other *Fantasy AGE* books. For example, you can find some references to potential cults in *Fantasy AGE Encounter: Children's Crusade*. You might want to look at the *Fantasy AGE* rules as they apply to arcane devices and see if you can get ideas there.

Another fantastic option is to consider the *AGE Explorations: Gifts of the Gods* supplement, and treat your players to new background options or the new, special talent of the Divine Gift. This might also help players accustomed to prerequisite classes and domains to ease their way into this brave new system.

#### DIVINE EXAMPLE

## MAHRE, MOTHER OF NATURE

During this chapter, we listed several example gods. Now we're going to build the gentlest-sounding of them all—Mahre, the keeper of crops, mother of all nature—and show you how even the most peaceful religion can harbor its own hidden dangers, darkness, and adversaries.

To better understand this process, let us use Rachael as an example.

Rachael is going to run a game for her friends. They have already discussed the themes and frameworks they want to explore; her players are interested in traveling a hero's journey across a fantasy world that lies somewhere between the low fantasy and dark fantasy subgenres. While they don't want to dictate precisely what adventures they have, her players know that they want to start as simple folk, friends and neighbors in a no-name village; by the end of the campaign, they want to see their heroes be shining exemplars of the light.

None of her players are interested in having their protagonists tied to any religion; this gives Rachael a little more creative leeway. Because there is no mechanical requirement placed on her to suit the characters' needs, she is free to consider broad options that better serve the feeling of her world and the story she wants to tell.

## DIVINE ORIGINS

She starts simply. Because these fresh-faced adventurers grew up knowing only their immediate surroundings—farmland, workable earth, and miles and miles of nothing but grassy plains—she figures the villagers wouldn't have a whole pantheon of gods to worship like city folk might. Even if they are aware of other gods, their scope is narrower. Since the heroes are growing up around farmland, she decides the primary faith of this settlement is that of a nature deity. She will call this god Mahre.

In the tradition of low and dark fantasy, Rachael decides these farmer folk have no proof that gods truly exist. Instead, they rely only on beliefs and stories passed down from elders. Farmers thank, love, and revere Mahre—but she does not



physically walk among them. Instead, her most devout followers find signs of her passing all around them. To them, she is the bountiful harvest, the rain that nurtures the fields, and the warmth of the fire on a hearth.

It is very likely that this small community, left to its own, has worshipped Mahre for as long as any can remember. It is thanks to her their crops flourish, the water is clean, and their small, hardy population survives the winter.

As in real life, even if the heroes do not openly worship Mahre or choose to ally themselves to her faith, snippets of her presence will appear throughout the characters' lives. The village likely has simple trappings of the faith—wooden necklaces and charms instead of golden chains, adorned with reaching vines and sprouting flowers. Good metal, potentially difficult to come by, is likely saved for sturdy farming tools and weapons to protect families. The village's smith probably has the greatest store of the highest-quality metals, and the Game Master realizes that this would be a great place to introduce another god.

The smith, she decides, favors a different god. This god would need to control heat, fire, and the metals and minerals of the world. This would not necessarily put the new god at odds against Mahre; in fact, this might be a good way to introduce the concept of faiths working together to create a stronger whole.

Another quick flash of an idea hits Rachael: Not only does the smith worship this god, but maybe the local healer does as well. Heat can soothe just as it burns. Now there are two

NPCs with whom her heroes can speak—two very different people with very different attitudes—who worship a god of flame. Suddenly the settlement has two well-known NPCs and another god to add extra flavor to the locale.

Rachael doesn't need to flesh out the god of fire just yet. For now, she jots down a random name—Arshin the Fire-Forged—and moves on.

## ICONS & SYMBOLS

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Next, Rachael should decide if there are any symbols or animals that her goddess might hold dear. She looks for inspiration in her favorite histories and stories, and decides that the stag is the most revered of Mahre's creatures. Moreover, she decides that the sigil of the goddess will be a variation on a Green Man; the sigil will be a warm, welcoming face of wood and leaves, with delicate horns growing in twisting, turning patterns above the slight points of sylvan ears.

The next step has Rachael consider whether the faith requires any core tenets or creeds. Since this faith is being built around a simple and small community, it makes sense that followers wouldn't have any rigorous commandments to follow, but they instead have lessons to learn. Mahre teaches when to sow and when to reap, when to watch for the changes of seasons, and how to respect the balance inherent in the world.

Taking a page from the traditions of Wicca, Paganism, and Druidism, Rachael establishes that Mahre holds most sacred

the solstices and harvest times, the seasons of fertility and the seasons of death. The seasonal cycles are welcomed and lovingly celebrated; as the world changes, so, too, must they all. The villagers hold group gatherings and celebrations, where they enjoy the fruits of their hard labor in song, food, and drink. The peace and the warmth of the community are celebrated as fervently as the season's blessings from the goddess.

Solstices, though, are not the only times the faithful worship. Devout followers likely keep a personal shrine to Mahre within their homes. A private garden or lovingly tended plant with woven branches and adorned with her sigil would be respectful, loving ways to pay homage.

The dead would be treated with similar love and respect; with endings regarded as a natural part of Mahre's cycles, the community would band together to honor the passing of the loved one. There would be no shame in survivors' expressions of pain; this would be a time for strength in unity. Taking inspiration from a real-life practice, Rachael decides that Mahre's followers ritually prepare the remains of the fallen, shaping the body into a fetal position—for Mahre teaches, "As we are born, so shall we return"—and weaving seeds into this pod. The body is then buried within a sacred grove; no markers are allowed, and no locations are announced to those not in attendance. In the years to follow, a new tree from the incorporated seeds replenishes the earth around it, and the cycle forever continues.

## DIVINE ATTITUDES

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Rachael's next step is to figure out Mahre's views on the sentient races, and who among them may worship her. As everything alive is a part of the world's energies, there will be no inherent law regarding special treatment of any particular race. Because her heroes are starting in a humanocentric community where nearly all of the populace is human, not only will the farm-folk not give too much thought to this, but they may not even understand faiths that insist otherwise. This might be a boon to Rachael's characters as well as a curse: On the one hand, their innocence and learned equal treatment may teach them some hard lessons after they leave the safety of their home environment, but it may also raise them in the esteem of other, less popular races.

Because this is a low-fantasy world, magic is going to be more scarce and awe-inspiring than in settings of other genres. Despite that, because magic is still an inherent feature of the game, Mahre's followers would view the existence and use of magic to be a natural thing. The few, lucky people who are gifted not just with magic but with control over the environment and its elements are celebrated; certainly these gifts are a blessing from Mahre.

Mahre seems to be so even-keeled and so accepting of the world around her, it makes sense that if a worshipper loses their faith, it would have no direct impact on the character from a mechanical standpoint. Rachael makes a note to create a god whose lack of favor does indicate a direct impact—something brutal, to contrast with Mahre's acceptance. She scribbles down a random name—Ul'zad the Warbringer—and sets it aside for later. It will have no impact on her players' starting environment.

## POSSIBLE CAMPAIGN EFFECTS

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With these basics in place, Rachael now has enough information to explain to her players what daily life might be like for their characters. Even if they themselves do not worship Mahre, they will recognize the practices, seasonal festivities, signs, and sigils of that faith. This can help her protagonists as they travel throughout the world on their epic journey towards heroism.

Rachael pauses a moment before moving on to the next god; she wants to make sure this "starting" deity will serve the story's needs. Her players wanted some dark-fantasy elements in the campaign, including themes of facing interesting and difficult choices, and themes of strife, struggle, and internal battle.

Rachael decides that these themes can apply to this god. Instead of moving on to the next deity, she begins making an offshoot of this religion. This offshoot will be secretive, hidden so deeply that much of the world won't know of its existence or its dedication to destroying humanity—and it is especially unknown to some no-name adventurers in the middle of some farm town.

She creates the Ash-Cult of Mahre.

## THE ASH-CULT OF MAHRE

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Every time the Game Master and her players have seen elves in stories, they have been presented as the good and just (if haughty) protectors of nature. While insular, they can be counted on to help save the world. They are frequently the beautiful "good guys" of the fantasy roleplaying scene.

Nature, though, has a duality. Just as there is life and growth, there is mold, decay, and death. One cannot happen without the other. Loving the ability to turn fantasy tropes on their head, Rachael finds the idea of having forest-loving elves as antagonists tantalizing. What's more, while there can be many villains with a purely evil intent as leaders of the Ash-Cult, if her heroes are somehow able to actually speak to one of these hidden cultists—a rare enough feat, considering they have only one half-elf in their party—perhaps they will find out an even more surprising secret: The Ash-Cult is trying to save the world.

The Ash-Cult of Mahre considers itself the keeper of the goddess's true histories. Mahre, the mother of the world, brought elves into existence first. As punishment for an ancient slight perpetrated long before history—or otherwise hidden to all except the highest of the Ash-Cult's high priests—humans were created, a fast-spreading plague on the land. Consuming resources thoughtlessly and reproducing faster than any elf ever might, humans in their hunger destroy all that the elves need—and with it, they destroy the world.

Mahre's "true" texts insist the creation of humans was meant as only a temporary punishment, and even Mahre herself had not foreseen how destructive this new breed of parasite was. She promised redemption to the elves, a green, overflowing world once more, once the human threat was culled.

Only after the last human is destroyed and turned to ash, denied even renewal in the ground, will the elves break the curse on the world and regain Mahre's forever green and

growing utopia. This is why the religion calls Mahre the Ash-Healer; it is by her will that they cure the human plague and turn their bodies to ash.

This could mean a sect of the Ash-Cult is pure evil. This could also mean that a different sect may consist of truly well-meaning elves who are trying to save the world. It may even allow for a sect of humans or half-elves who believe that the cause is far greater and more important than they are and are therefore intent on helping to get rid of humanity; once they are the last of the breed, they will nobly sacrifice themselves to save the world.

Rachael saves this idea; she believes the best villains are the ones who think they're the heroes. There are now many options for potential conflicts of belief, not just between the followers of Mahre and other religions, but now, between the Ash-Cult and the "main" religion followed by the non-elven population.

## SHADOW OF THE GODDESS

Because the protagonists of this campaign are going to be mostly human, this will present Rachael's players with plenty of opportunities for exploration and roleplaying. As the heroes progress through their adventures, they may start to suspect that the Mahre they have worshipped all their lives is not the only one in existence. They may understand Mahre only as a goddess who has smiled upon humanity and taught

them the ancient secrets of mastering the land—a concept the Ash-Cult would punish, as to them a human "mastering" the land is as good as destroying it.

Rachael pauses to reflect: What would happen if her party somehow learned that their entire race was believed responsible for the slow and certain death of the world? Worse yet, what if there were an artifact that could prove this to be the case? Would the heroes become allies of this offshoot faith and help to save the world through genocide? Or would they disagree, reject this as a false hope and a twisted aberration of the true goddess of their homeland, and try to save the world by stymying the elves?

For now, her players can be kept in the dark. Their simple origins allow for all of this beautiful conflict to arise later. At the game's beginning, they will know only what their tiny farmland environment and its innocent worship tell them.

## REFLECTIONS & DISTORTIONS

Rachael then turns her attention specifically to any differences between the trappings of the human goddess and the elven Ash-Cult. It may never even come up as a question, if her heroes do not pursue any related story hooks, but she considers it so she has answers in case it does.

Similarities in sigils, songs, and tools make sense; if Mahre the Ash-Healer were truly the source of the religion, then Mahre the Mother would have very similar trappings. A human might see the difference as a source of hope and inspiration or as proof there can be peace. An Ash-Cultist elf, however, would likely be offended by any "perversion" of their symbols. "You even infect her holy sigils and make dirty her sweet face by turning it round and human," they spit.

This also means a very keen observer might recognize an Ash-Cultist by the slight differences in the holy symbols of Mahre they wear. This would be a very difficult skill challenge.

When considering the contrasts in rites or events, Rachael hits upon the most glaring difference. The goddess worshiped by the humans believes in returning their dead to the earth, to nurture a new seed into growth to help sustain and nourish future generations. The Mahre revered by the Ash-Cultists reserves these rites only for races that have not "polluted" her lands. Any humans who fall to their religious zealotry are not afforded that deep, fertile resting place. Instead, their bodies are burned and their ashes scattered to the winds.

Rachael decides this isn't dark enough and creates a new tradition for the Ash-Cult: its high priests keep the ash of the first humans they burn, and in times of great war and initiation rites, they paint their faces with the burnt remains of their first kills.

The depth of this offshoot faith not only helps encourage roleplaying between the characters when they discover this, but also creates some fantastic story tension between the heroes and the Ash-Cult. What's more, it serves as a seed of inspiration for any future players wanting to play a half- or full-blooded elf.



## ANCESTRY & POLITICS

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Lingering on the fact that she has a half-elf in her party, Rachael gives some extra thought to how the cult perceives them. The Ash-Cult is set to destroy humans, but that is the only racial guidance in this religion. What do they do with half-elves?

Half a poison may still harm someone, she reasons. An Ash-Cultist might hate the human who “poisoned and corrupted” an elf – such interspecies love would be anathema to them – but the actual half-elf would be looked upon with pity. A dying child, worthy of a merciful slaughter. The Ash-Cultist offers “comfort” in the form of a promise to free the poor creature from the horrible curse into which it was born and to burn away the human taint so their elven half finally finds freedom. “Rejoice, poor child,” they might say, “For your release is near, and with it, you bring us all one step closer to a peaceful and growing world.”

Moving on, Rachael considers the role of any Ash-Cultists in the arena of politics. While neither sect of Mahre has much

interest in the goings-on of big cities and their inconsequential governments, it is still possible to find an Ash-Cultist in those environments. What better way to spy and gain leverage over the human world than to immerse oneself in it? How much easier would it be to help their brethren cleanse the world from within the city gates?

## FINALIZING MAHRE

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Whether or not the heroes of this campaign decide to pursue any plot lines dealing with Mahre or the Ash-Cult, Rachael now has all of this material in place, just in case. This will not only help her be prepared in case a plot twist (whether introduced by her or the players) takes the characters away from her anticipated storylines, but it will also plant seeds for future campaigns. After all, just because the heroes are dealing with one threat, it doesn't mean the rest of the world is not still moving and changing, or that dark forces are not still forwarding their own nefarious goals.

## RANDOM RELIGIONS

Use this section to create singular gods, entire pantheons, or cults that follow them. Use the same tables to create demons or other deities whose power resides within specific domains.

This is far from an exhaustive list of possible domains that a deity could have, but it should give you a good basis for coming up with something on the fly. Don't feel committed to using exactly what you roll. If you're creating a demon and you roll “travel,” they could be a demon of disrupted travel or ruined plans. Use these as a jumping-off point and get as creative as you like. Feel free to roll more than once on this table for any given deity, especially if you get something silly on the first roll. A god of spicy cheeses is just silly, but a god of sex and spicy cheeses inspires interesting pre-coital rituals for their followers.

Cults venerate their deities in various ways. Roll 1d3 times on the **Cult Activities** table to determine how this cult worships. Then create a deity for them to worship by rolling 1d3 times on the **Domain** table. Alternatively, roll once on the **Domain** table to determine the concept this cult worships; instead of worshipping a god of beauty, for example, this cult could worship Beauty itself. The **Cult Activities** table may also be used to determine the general practices of a religion, though you may want to roll a few more times and tone down the extremism.

Note that some cults may pay homage to a god for protection from that god's domains. A festival in honor of the god of evil and chaos might be a horrific affair filled with blood and sacrifice, or it might be a desperate attempt by mortals to curry favor to avoid suffering from evil and chaotic acts and events.

After rolling on the **Festival** table to determine the central activities of the festival, roll once (or more) on the **Domain** table to determine the theme (or themes) of the festival, and generate or choose a deity to be the subject of the festival. Generally, festivals created in worship of specific deities will in some way tie into that deity's domain, so a festival celebrating the harvest would venerate the god of harvest and

be centered around food. But that doesn't have to be the case. The harvest festival could give tribute to the god of death in thanks for not killing the crops and involve the destruction of failed crops via a food fight. A festival thrown before going off to war could celebrate the god of fertility so a new generation will be born to replace those lost in battle, and it might involve the consumption of herbs thought to be aphrodisiacs. Do your best to tie these pieces together, but you can always re-roll if you can't make something make sense.

### EXAMPLE

## A CULTISTS' FESTIVAL

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Nguyen wants to create a cult, a god for them to follow, and a festival celebrating that god. He rolls three times on **Cult Activities**, getting Public Prayer, Religious Clothing, and Human Sacrifice. He's not sure what to do with that, but he moves onto the **Domain** table where he rolls Beauty, Death, and Creation. Now he's starting to tie some ideas together between death, creation, and human sacrifice. Maybe this cult thinks their god of beauty, death, and creation needs them to perform human sacrifice so the sacrificed can be reborn.

Next, he rolls on the **Festival** table and gets Manifestation, but the “body modification” line in **Body Art** also catches his eye. This cult of beauty, death, and creation somehow modifies the bodies of their sacrifices in order for the avatar of their god to manifest!

Finally, Nguyen rolls again on the **Domain** table to determine some more details of the festival and gets Tailoring. At this point he decides he's done rolling, because he's got this all figured out.

A cult that worships Cedar, the god of beauty, death, and creation, has been kidnapping people who have attributes they find particularly beautiful. They are cutting those people up and sewing together a massive flesh golem that will become the living avatar of Cedar once they complete their final ritual. Nguyen decides to make their public prayer and religious clothing more subdued but still present, as a way of



## RELIGION STRUCTURE

D6	RESULT
1	<b>MONOTHEISTIC:</b> This religion follows a single deity who might be called Allmother, Creator, God, The Maker, or The One, or it might have a name no one knows.
2-3	<b>BITHEISTIC:</b> This religion follows dual gods whose domains are the opposite of one another, such as Day and Night, Summer and Winter, or Love and Hate. These two deities might be seen as good and evil, or they may be seen as neither or both. They might oppose one another in an eternal war, or they might be constant lovers.
4-5	<b>PANTHEON:</b> Create 3d6 gods (or as many as you like) by rolling 1d3 times on the <b>Domain</b> table for each of them.
6	<b>FAMILIAL PANTHEON:</b> Create 3d6 gods (or as many as you like) by rolling 1d3 times on the <b>Domain</b> table for each of them. Then roll on the <b>Relationship</b> table on page 56 for each pair of gods. This is likely to result in an incestuous family tree, which is common in many pantheons.

## DOMAIN

D6	D6	D6	RESULT	D6	D6	D6	RESULT	D6	D6	D6	RESULT
		1-2	Acting/Actors			1-2	Flight			1-2	Reptiles
1	3-4		Amphibians	1	3-4		Friendship	1	3-4		Rivers
	5-6		Assassins		5-6		Gemstones		5-6		Rogues
	1-2		Autumn		1-2		Gender/Gender Fluidity		1-2		Sailors/Sailing
2	3-4		Bards	2	3-4		Harvest	2	3-4		Saints/Martyrs
	5-6		Beaches		5-6		Hunting		5-6		Sex
	1-2		Beards		1-2		Infirmities		1-2		Secrets
3	3-4		Beasts	3	3-4		Innocence	3	3-4		Shadows
	5-6		Beauty		5-6		Innovation		5-6		Small Things
1	1-2		Birds	3	1-2		Insects	5	1-2		Smiths/Smithing
4	3-4		Bladed Weapons	4	3-4		Irritations	4	3-4		Spices
	5-6		Blunt Weapons		5-6		Jokes/Riddles		5-6		Spirits (alcohol)
	1-2		Bricklaying		1-2		Joy		1-2		Spirits/Ghosts
5	3-4		Brutality	5	3-4		Knitting/Weaving	5	3-4		Spring
	5-6		Chaos		5-6		Killing/Murder		5-6		Slaughter
	1-2		Creation		1-2		Light		1-2		Sleep
6	3-4		Dancing	6	3-4		Lightning	6	3-4		Stillness
	5-6		Day		5-6		Literacy		5-6		Summer
	1-2		Dawn		1-2		Love		1-2		The Sun
1	3-4		Death	1	3-4		Lust	1	3-4		Tailoring
	5-6		Demons		5-6		Luck		5-6		Taverns/Inns
	1-2		Desire		1-2		Mages		1-2		Time
2	3-4		Despair	2	3-4		Martial Arts	2	3-4		Travel
	5-6		Destruction		5-6		Medicine		5-6		Trickery
	1-2		Disease		1-2		Milk/Cheese		1-2		Unfortunate Events
3	3-4		Dragons	3	3-4		Monsters	3	3-4		War
	5-6		Dreams		5-6		The Moon		5-6		Warriors
2	1-2		Earth	4	1-2		Music	6	1-2		Water
4	3-4		Emotions	4	3-4		Night	4	3-4		Wealth
	5-6		Evil		5-6		Nightmares		5-6		Weapons
	1-2		Fear		1-2		Nobility		1-2		Wind
5	3-4		Fertility	5	3-4		Plants	5	3-4		Winter
	5-6		Fire		5-6		Plots/Plans		5-6		Woe/Sorrow
	1-2		Finding Lost Things		1-2		Poison		1-2		Wood
6	3-4		Fish	6	3-4		Politics	6	3-4		Woodcutters
	5-6		Flesh		5-6		Pranks/Practical Jokes		5-6		Youth

## CULT ACTIVITIES

3d6	RESULT
3	<b>HUMAN SACRIFICE:</b> This cult kills people in service of their deity. They might be volunteers, but probably not.
4	<b>VOW OF SILENCE:</b> Perhaps the cultists never speak at all, or perhaps they speak only in certain locations, at certain times, or with certain people.
5	<b>ABOLITION OF MAGIC:</b> Magic is bad. Anyone who practices magic is bad. Anyone who supports people who practice magic is bad.
6	<b>PIERCING OR TATTOOS:</b> Ritual piercing and tattooing can be very elaborate, painful, and impractical. Don't assume the cult performs these modifications only on willing participants.
7	<b>ANIMAL SACRIFICE:</b> Often such sacrifices require a specific sort of animal. If this specific sort happens to be one that others keep as livestock or even as pets, the cultists are unlikely to acquire said sacrifices via legitimate means.
8	<b>DOOR-TO-DOOR EVANGELISM:</b> They're nothing if not persistent. These cultists will gladly have almost every door in the city slammed in their face if it means that just one of those doors is opened for a conversation about their worship.
9	<b>CEREMONIAL MEALS:</b> Food-based rituals are common among many religions, involving specific foods that may or may not be eaten, specific prayers that must be said over food, or actions that must be taken during the preparation or consumption of meals.
10	<b>PUBLIC PRAYER:</b> Public prayer for the dominant religion is unlikely to draw much ire, but public prayer to a fringe deity is a bold action, often seen as heresy.
11	<b>WORN ICONOGRAPHY:</b> These cultists adorn themselves with physical objects whose shapes represent the object of their worship.
12	<b>INTERPRETIVE DANCE:</b> Many religions and cultures incorporate traditional dance. Cult dances might seem rather outlandish to outsiders.
13	<b>RELIGIOUS CLOTHING:</b> Specific clothing must be worn by members of this cult. Usually this comes in the form of ceremonial robes, but it could also involve accessories like hats, jewelry, or even religiously mandated undergarments.
14	<b>BODY PAINT:</b> The painting of one's face or body might be required during cult ceremonies or it might be something the cultists do all the time as a mark of their service.
15	<b>ELABORATE SEX RITUALS:</b> Use your imagination.
16	<b>SELF-FLAGELLATION:</b> These cultists whip themselves in reverence to their god, leaving great welts on their backs or other parts of their body.
17	<b>VIOLENT CONVERSION OF NONBELIEVERS:</b> Follow or die. Those are the only options. Those who refuse to join the cult and follow its practices will be killed on the spot or tortured until they agree to convert.
18	<b>SUICIDE PACT:</b> A cult whose ultimate goal is to kill themselves doesn't sound like much of a threat until you consider the elaborate brainwashing that must have taken place to convince their followers that this was a good idea. Many devastated loved ones are likely to be left behind in the wake.

## FESTIVAL

3d6	RESULT
3	<b>SACRIFICE:</b> This festival involves the permanent destruction of something related to the subject of its worship.
4	<b>WAIT, WHAT?:</b> The practices for this celebration are outright strange. Even the practitioners acknowledge that what they're doing makes no sense, and they can't find any sensible way to tie their actions to the subject of their worship – though some do try.
5	<b>MANIFESTATION:</b> An avatar of the deity being worshipped physically manifests and interacts with their followers.
6	<b>SORROW:</b> This is not a happy festival, and most would not use the word "celebration" to describe it. The mood is solemn and the themes are dark. Something terrible happened that followers do not want to forget because they don't want to repeat it.
7	<b>DRINKING:</b> What does alcohol have to do with the wind? Or reptiles? Or tailoring? Why are you asking inane questions instead of having another ale?
8	<b>GAMES:</b> Traditional, festival-themed games are played. These may involve board games, card games, or even physical sport.
9	<b>DECORATION:</b> Most festivals involve decoration of some kind, but this particular festival focuses heavily on themed ornamentation.
10	<b>FEAST:</b> A great feast is held with the whole community contributing food and drink.
11	<b>DANCE:</b> Dances are performed, specifically celebrating this deity, their domain, or stories told about them.
12	<b>COSTUMES:</b> Celebrators don costumes themed for the festival's subject.
13	<b>ART:</b> Participants sculpt, paint, craft, or make other physical works of art in celebration.
14	<b>BODY ART:</b> Your skin is your canvas! Usually this involves painting, whether delicately with tiny brushes or haphazardly with buckets thrown about or somewhere in between. However, some cultures might practice ritual piercing, tattooing, branding, or other body modification.
15	<b>STORYTELLING:</b> Festivals frequently involve telling the story of their deity's origin, but this holiday's primary focus is in the telling of its story, including possibly acting it out.
16	<b>SPRING FLING:</b> Or Travel Toss, or Plant Pitch, or something else about throwing. Whatever the domain, this festival involves the throwing of relevant items, perhaps at one another, off a cliff, or straight up in the air.
17	<b>BURNING:</b> Something is burned that either represents the subject of this festival or its antithesis.
18	<b>SELF-SACRIFICE:</b> This festival involves harming oneself in a manner fitting the subject of the celebration. Human sacrifice and permanent mutilation are uncommon, though some faiths demand them.



## BUILDING SUBGENRES

**F**antasy AGE is a game of heroic fantasy roleplaying, and as such it can be used for most fantasy campaigns largely unaltered. However, fantasy is a wide genre, filled with numerous subgenres. Some of these subgenres benefit from customizing rules, themes, and settings to fit their distinctive qualities. One such subgenre, romantic fantasy, is already explored in in another AGE game, *Blue Rose*. However, there are numerous other subgenres, and this chapter will discuss some of the more popular and interesting ones, as well as how to represent them in *Fantasy AGE*.

This chapter is organized somewhat differently than others in this book. After a discussion of various subgenres, rather than providing a single dedicated example devoted to a single subgenre, the chapter presents a number of optional rules to help emulate certain subgenres. This is done to provide the broadest utility and mechanical support for GMs seeking to modify their campaigns. GMs seeking to create their own rules and options can use the examples provided to craft their own subgenre play options.

### SUBGENRE TYPES

The following is a list of some of the subgenres popular in fantasy today, as well as some less popular but interesting variations. Each entry includes not only a description of the subgenre, but also its common conventions and examples of the subgenre in fiction. Play options common to a subgenre are also discussed, most of which are located in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*.

This is not a comprehensive list of fantasy subgenres, mostly because compiling such a list would be nearly impossible. New subgenres and combinations of existing genres in fantasy are being invented every day. From Asian-themed modern urban fantasy procedurals to Biblical era zombie apocalypse tales, bookstores and TV networks are filled with people trying to do new things with fantasy – and often succeeding. Game Masters are encouraged to do the same, if they feel so inclined.

In addition, since Green Ronin's *Blue Rose* is devoted to romantic fantasy, and epic fantasy in campaigns has its own chapter in this book, those two subgenres aren't explored here. Interested readers are encouraged to check out those two sources instead.

### FANTASY HORROR

Fantasy horror undercuts the usual strong fantasy protagonist and presents a world of vulnerable, often flawed heroes who must battle fear, vice, and other mortal shortcomings in the face of terror and violence. Fantasy horror often involves eldritch horrors, demons, and similar threats, though a campaign drawing from contemporary slasher films or zombie movies could also be quite interesting.

Heroes in fantasy horror campaigns tend to die, go crazy, and otherwise lead short albeit dramatic existences. Stories and campaigns that mix horror with comedy or action tend to buck this trend. Adversaries are often powerful, sometimes capable of killing heroes with ease or driving them mad with fear.

- **CONVENTIONS:** The world is filled with terrible wonders and threats. Life is precious yet fragile. Loss of sanity can be as dangerous as loss of life. Virtue is a powerful weapon, but it may not be enough in the face of powerful evil.
- **INSPIRATION:** The Cthulhu Mythos of H.P. Lovecraft and others, Stephen King's *The Dark Tower* series, Robert E. Howard's Solomon Kane stories, and various "B" movies such as *A Company of Wolves*, *Van Helsing*, and *Hansel and Gretel: Witch Hunters*.
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Fantasy horror usually employs options to increase combat lethality, and it may include house rules that make abuse of dark magic dangerous or represent the effects of fear and madness.

## URBAN FANTASY

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Focusing on urban environments and often possessing strong procedural and mystery themes, this subgenre is often but not always set in a modern setting, especially in recent media and fiction. However, there are many fantasy stories set in non-modern fantasy locales centered around urban areas and characters.

Urban fantasy usually involves a number of characters who possess strange abilities or powers but also face the daily challenges of urban life such as paying bills and working a job. A strong ensemble cast of extras, allies, and enemies is common, as is a mix of serial cases and missions and overarching events involving major characters in the city's power structures—government, criminal, business, and mystical. Monsters, demons, and other adversaries are often alarmingly human seeming, and in some cases work and live among human and humanoid races with varying degrees of success.

- **CONVENTIONS:** Cities have their own life and rules, and monsters are people, too. A hero's still got to eat. There are a million stories in the city, and the heroes tend to get entangled with the most dangerous and interesting ones, try as they might.
- **INSPIRATION:** Fritz Lieber's *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* series (stories and novels), Jim Butcher's *The Dresden Files* (novels), Robert Lynn Aspiron's *Thieves' World* (stories and novels).
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Urban fantasy tends to be grittier and deadlier than other types of fantasy, employing options to raise damage or reduce Health so heroes must be more careful. Organization rules may be used to represent crime syndicates, government agencies, and other factions. Relationship mechanics are common as well.

## MAZES & MONSTERS

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A style of fantasy familiar to most long-term fantasy tabletop gamers, this subgenre focuses on wandering heroes seeking fame and fortune by exploring dungeons, tombs, and other trap-laden, monster-heavy regions. Heroes don't necessarily possess a higher calling or strong morals; many just want to get rich. That said, many dungeon delvers and heroes for hire become powerful and famous champions and leaders as their power and fortunes grow.

Mazes and monsters-style fantasy is more represented in role-playing games than in fiction, though some of the most famous fantasy stories have scenes or plots that involve exploring ancient mines, seeking some lost treasure in a hidden temple, and other activities heroes in this subgenre do as a matter of course. Heroes are often judged for their current skills and actions more than their past or pedigree, and often characters with little in common meet up and ally especially for the purpose of going on adventures to explore, fight, and gain treasure.

- **CONVENTIONS:** Dungeons are full of traps, monsters, and treasure. Important and dangerous things still lurk hidden in the wilds and below the earth. "You all meet in a tavern..."
- **INSPIRATION:** Numerous fantasy roleplaying games and supplements, most notably *Dungeons & Dragons*.
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** This subgenre usually works well with the default rules, though high-level heroes might eventually gain titles and run their own organizations, as well as leading armies in the occasional mass combat.

## SWORD & SORCERY

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Finding its origins in the pulp fantasy of the early 20th century, sword and sorcery is a subgenre of fantasy focused on personal heroics, romance, cinematic action, and powerful, dangerous magic. In sword and sorcery, power tends to come at a great cost, and individual achievement is paramount. A skilled warrior can rise to become the ruler of a nation, and heroes will face fallen gods and foul beasts alike for fortune, glory, and love.

Sword and sorcery stories often involve a lot of travel and delve deeply into the history and prehistory of their settings in active ways. The heroes encounter secrets of lost civilizations, fallen gods, demonic forces, and other elements. Magic-wielding heroes are relatively rare in sword and sorcery settings, though far from unheard of. This is often because magic in this subgenre is powerful but deliberate and somewhat slow to perform. A sorcerer might summon a demon that can level a city, but this action requires time and sacrifice that give others ample time to prevent such disasters. The nature of magic in sword and sorcery also means that most magic-users are either peculiar recluses or powerful political figures with cults, followers, and ample minions to keep them safe from attack.

- **CONVENTIONS:** Heroes can carve out a kingdom with their swords. Lost civilizations and forgotten gods abound. Magic is slow but powerful.
- **INSPIRATION:** The Conan and Kull stories of Robert Howard, Fritz Lieber's *Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser* stories, and DC Comics' *Warlord* and *Arion, Lord of Atlantis*.
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Action points are commonly used to represent the characters' ability to dig deep when necessary to achieve great heroics. Mob and minion rules are sometimes used to reflect that great heroes are rarely troubled by goons and riffraff.

## MARTIAL ARTS FANTASY

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Common in East Asia, this subgenre focuses on the use, practice, and cultivation of martial arts prowess in settings where

those skills grant fame and power. Where in some subgenres martial arts are a useful tool, here they are a lifestyle and calling. Factions, rival schools, and martial arts clans feature heavily in the rivalries, romances, intrigues, and revenge-laden drama that are common to this genre.

In this subgenre, “magic” is often considered a form of specialized martial training. Most characters possess certain powers or abilities common to all martial arts heroes in the setting, such as “light foot” martial arts techniques allowing them to leap and run even across narrow or flimsy surfaces with ease. Adversaries are usually humans and humanoids trained in martial arts, though demons, animals, and other nonhuman threats also menace the heroes from time to time.

Most countries in East Asia have their own legends, traditions, and varieties of martial arts fantasy. Fantasy settings often mix these elements to create pastiches and amalgams, though others are based solely on the myths, legends, and martial arts of a single nation or culture.

- **CONVENTIONS:** Martial arts can work wonders. A skilled warrior can face an army of lesser foes. Secret societies of martial artists exist across the world and command great power and influence. Honor and excellence are more valuable than riches.
- **INSPIRATION:** Wuxia films such as Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Zhang Yimou’s *Hero*, the Shaw Brothers’ kung fu movies, and countless other films. AMC’s *Into the Badlands* (TV series).
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Martial arts fantasy games often make use of optional rules that allow heroes to fight through armies of lesser foes, such as minion rules, stunt pools, or action points. Relationship and organization mechanics may feature prominently as well. Mass battles are a regular occurrence in some settings, but they are rarely played out as they are often backdrops for duels between a handful of supremely talented martial artists.

## WEIRD FANTASY

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Weird fantasy is, well... weird. It focuses on strange and fantastical elements more than mundane elements such as wealth, conventional intrigue, and the like. These elements usually become central to the world and plot. This means that weird fantasy tales are those which really only work because of the weirdness of their settings. For example, if a world is constructed of floating islands based on the various classic elements, then monsters, travel, plots, and civilizations will be strongly focused around these concepts.

This subgenre can be great fun, but the players and GM must still be able to hang some conventional context and ideas on all the strangeness or it becomes unwieldy and confusing. An invading race of sentient musical notes from a otherworldly plane of pure sound might be a great idea, but if they can’t interact meaningfully with the campaign and player characters, then they quickly become a frustration.

- **CONVENTIONS:** The strange is the mundane. High concepts mix with everyday creatures and occurrences to make new threats and phenomena (rains of liquid sorrow, colored energies that channel emotions into solid form, and so forth).

- **INSPIRATION:** Clive Barker’s *Imajica* and *Abarat* novels, the Silver John stories of Manly Wade Wellman, and Marvel Comics’ *Weirdworld* comics.
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Weird fantasy tends to have a lot of magic and strange creatures, including unusual specializations such as gunfighters, marked (mystic tattooed warriors), and other options found in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*. The rules in the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* on customizing adversaries are a useful tool allowing GMs to transform fantasy creatures into strange variants.

## POST-APOCALYPTIC FANTASY

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Sometimes the heroes didn’t save the world. In post-apocalyptic fantasy, a world-shattering calamity came and went, leaving the world devastated and dying. For many characters in post-apocalyptic fantasy, survival is adventure enough and even small communities often become incredibly important. Apocalypses in fantasy are usually supernatural in nature, though it is conceivable that worldwide war or environmental devastation could destroy civilization on a global scale in a setting.

In some cases, the introduction of mystical or fantasy elements causes an apocalypse on a more modern or mundane world. In such cases, elements like elves, dragons, and magic are new and viewed as harbingers of the end times. This creates an environment where commonplace fantasy elements become sources of distrust and symbols of ruin.

Resources and rewards are scarce in this subgenre. The fall of civilization makes food, water, and other necessities valuable resources that people fight to protect or acquire. Traditional treasure is usually worth much less in these campaigns, though magic or powerful weapons retain their value—they can be used to protect or acquire necessities, as well as protecting people from the many dangers of the wastelands. In some campaigns, there is some hope of restoring necessary resources and rebuilding civilization. In others, there is nothing to do but survive until one’s final days.

- **CONVENTIONS:** The world is mostly wasteland and small, struggling communities. Hordes and barbarians wander and seek conquest and plunder. Once-common resources are invaluable. There may be a way to rebuild, but it will require sacrifice, heroism, and hardship.
- **INSPIRATION:** Mark Lawrence’s *Broken Empire* series, Jack Vance’s *Dying Earth* series, and Gene Wolfe’s *Book of the New Sun* series.
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** As the source material is bleak, options that increase the lethality of combat and other dangers are commonplace in post-apocalyptic fantasy campaigns. As civilization is dying or destroyed, rules for organizations and mass battles sometimes see use to represent hordes of marauders and the importance of the last bastions of civilization.

## HISTORICAL FANTASY

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Historical fantasy comes in two broad types. The first is set on Earth, but with fantasy elements interjected. Sometimes these are few but significant, such as the addition of certain



types of magic or a few types of fantastic creatures. Other times changes are broad-reaching and significant across the board, with monsters, magic, and other fantasy elements applied heavily to a period of Earth's history. The second type of historical fantasy applies Earthlike concepts and events to a fantasy world. A fantasy kingdom heavily inspired by Russia might go through a revolution that is a near-exact replica of the Russian revolution, or a setting might have empires nearly identical to Rome and Carthage but populated by elves and dwarves.

Usually the more a setting diverges from actual history, the more its elements become homages and references to historical events and people rather than closely borrowing from them. Thus an elf inspired by Julius Caesar might fight barbarians and try to establish himself as emperor, but the assassination attempt might fail to bring him down and need not involve being stabbed to death on the Senate floor. Often, to help keep history from diverging too much, fantasy elements are confined to a handful of individuals or locations. Other times, fantasy elements are linked to real-world historical groups or concepts to ground them in Earth history. For example, a historical fantasy setting inspired by Vikings and early medieval Europe might have bear-men or werebear berserkers who are actual Norsemen.

- **CONVENTIONS:** Things are mostly the same except for magic (or dragons, elves, etc.). Historic figures feature into adventures and plots regularly. Cool historical concepts, groups, and ideas have fantasy analogs.

- **INSPIRATION:** Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series (novels), Brian McClellan's *Powder Mage* series (novels), Jim Butcher's *Codex Alera* series (novels).
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Historical fantasy tends to be deadlier than the norm, and so options to make combat more dangerous or reduce Health are often employed. Mass battles are common occurrences, and rewards in the form of honorifics and titles are usually valuable and highly regarded as characters seek to carve out their own place in history.

## SWASHBUCKLING FANTASY

Swashbuckling fantasy is all about style, particularly the style of various novels and films most popular in the mid-20th century but whose influences are felt to this day. Swashbuckling adventure usually involves pirates, musketeers, and similarly roguish but often heroic sorts fighting for love and revenge or in opposition to corrupt authorities. Settings are often urban and contain strong political and urban themes. Some sword and sorcery tales have decidedly swashbuckling elements as well.

This style of fantasy often incorporates ideas and elements from ages of exploration and colonialism, with expeditions to faraway lands, wars of succession and imperial expansion, the introduction of firearms and lighter arms and armor into warfare, and elaborate social customs and class dynamics. A swashbuckling fantasy mixes its dramatic fencing duels and

back-alley acrobatic brawls with spies, international intrigue, romance, and other ideas common to such works as *The Three Musketeers* and its sequels.

- **CONVENTIONS:** A sword and some daring can carry the day. Cloak and dagger intrigue is as powerful as magic or armies in the right hands. Style is as important as substance, perhaps more so.
- **INSPIRATION:** Ellen Kushner's *Swordspoint* novels, William Goldman's *The Princess Bride*, and Saladin Ahmed's *Throne of the Crescent Moon*.
- **PLAY OPTIONS:** Swashbuckling fantasy often employs options that make player characters more able to handle scores of lesser foes, such as minion and action point rules.

## MASH-UP

Most subgenres start out as genre mash-ups. Two genres are combined to form a new and distinct concept, often with other genres or ideas used to fill in gaps where the combination is awkward or otherwise lacking. If these combinations become popular, they often become their own genres or subgenres. Examples of these include science fantasy and urban fantasy, which grew out of combinations of traditional fantasy with science fiction and detective procedurals, respectively.

Because of the great variety of mash-ups, there is no hard-and-fast set of rules, inspirations, or play options. Instead GMs should look to the component parts of their mash-ups and decide what to include or exclude. An urban science fantasy might reject space travel but keep aliens. A historical horror fantasy might double down on lethal combat and danger but avoid supernatural threats in favor of political thrillers tinged with murder and explorations of the darkness of the human spirit.

## SUBGENRE & ADVERSARIES

Subgenres often favor certain types of adversaries. For example, horror fantasy regularly makes use of undead, demons, and other monsters that would be at home in a modern horror film or novel. Other monsters are often altered by templates and special qualities to bring them more in line with the subgenre.

Guidelines on creating and modifying adversaries are found in **CHAPTER 7: BUILDING MONSTERS & ADVERSARIES** in this book, and additional rules and advice can be found in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and *Fantasy AGE Bestiary*. When using these resources to craft adversaries, GMs should take care to consider the subgenre of their campaigns. An evocative monster or customized creature can go a long way to making an encounter feel exceptionally appropriate for the desired subgenre.

### EXAMPLE

*Jack is running a fantasy horror campaign. He decides the next adventure will feature an outbreak of a magically spawned plague that turns living creatures into hungry dead. He works up a hungry dead template he can apply to adversaries to create zombified goblins, ogres, and in one terrifying case, a zombie thunderlord.*

## SUBGENRE & LOCATIONS

Interesting locations are key to any campaign, and in games based around a fantasy subgenre, they also help showcase those elements. A post-apocalyptic fantasy campaign may feature ruined cities and areas of mutagenic magic, while horror fantasy often introduces characters to fog-shrouded moors, crumbling haunted castles, and ancient crypts where terrible horrors lurk. Advice on creating locations appears in **CHAPTER 4: BUILDING LOCATIONS**.

### EXAMPLE

*Kate is running a swashbuckling fantasy campaign focused on valiant musketeers fighting sorcerous cabals and political intrigue in the capital of a fantasy kingdom. Wishing to maintain the proper atmosphere for her campaign, Kate creates various locations, including a decadent salon where noble mages socialize, a Bastille-like prison for political dissidents and corrupt sorcerers, and the elaborate grounds and wings of a royal palace where the heroes are frequently called to court.*



# GENRE EMULATION & RULES

One of the easiest ways to emulate the tone and themes of a fantasy subgenre is with rules that evoke these distinctions. When crafting a campaign within a subgenre, GMs should consider what parts of the subgenre they most want to promote and how this desire mixes with the needs of their players and games.

Many of the rules discussed below are found in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*, though some will need to be designed or determined by GMs and players. In most cases, adjusting and customizing *Fantasy AGE* for a fantasy subgenre is a mix of player and GM investment and rules adjustment. Usually small alterations are sufficient to change the theme or tone of the game to invoke the conventions of a subgenre.

## MAKING NEW RULES

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The following are some guidelines to use when crafting new rules for a campaign. They aren't particularly complex, but they are important to avoid misunderstanding, imbalance, and other problems.

### BE FAIR

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Rules don't need to be of equal utility or impact for every character, but they need to be applied fairly to those characters they affect. This means if you establish in a post-apocalyptic game that all magic in the wasteland is generally weaker (-1 Spellpower) but inclined to power surges at unpredictable times (+1 stunt point when rolling doubles), then this should affect the spells of both PCs and NPCs. If you allow an NPC who undergoes special training to take a new talent you've created in a martial arts fantasy game, then PCs who get the same training should be able to select it as well. To do otherwise risks annoying players and creating a sense that you don't have rules, but rather arbitrary and unpredictable whims.

Also, beware of rules that unbalance things in favor of a particular race, class, or another part of a character. This doesn't mean you can't make rules that favor mages or limit rogues or the like. However, benefits should come with appropriate limits to balance them out, and limits should come with benefits to do the same. Even if life isn't fair in a campaign world—and it often isn't—player options should be, or else you risk alienating players.

### BE INTERESTING

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If a new rule doesn't create an interesting situation or dilemma, don't use it. It might be realistic or appropriate to the genre, but that won't mean much during play if it's boring. A rule that tracks a character's sanity in a Lovecraft-style horror fantasy campaign is interesting because it creates situations where a character may suffer from bouts of insanity, and it showcases the cost of dealing with alien horrors and eldritch secrets, a central theme of the subgenre. On the other hand, that same campaign doesn't need detailed rules on survival and group supplies unless the campaign is also post-apoca-

## WHY AREN'T THESE IN THE COMPANION?

Some readers may wonder why the options for subgenres presented here weren't included in the *Fantasy AGE Companion* chapter on **Play Options**. There are two reasons for this.

The first is that *Fantasy AGE* is an evolving game, and new options are introduced and explored with each release. The **Play Options** chapter in the *Companion* was never meant to be the only way to alter or modify the game. New optional rules will occasionally be introduced, even in books such as this where new rules are not the chief focus.

Second, the options in this chapter are subgenre dependent. For example, there are many reasons a GM might want to make combat more lethal, increase adversary damage, treat certain threats as minions or mobs, and use other options present in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*. However, there are few reasons to include madness rules outside of a horror fantasy game or grave wounds outside a handful of subgenres where combat is supposed to have lasting effects. Thus they are included here to place them beside a discussion of the subgenres where they belong.

lyptic or otherwise based around concepts of resource scarcity and daily survival.

Even if a rule is appropriate thematically, take care that the players are engaging with it. If nobody at the table likes tracking "sanity points" or some other resource, GMs should explore more engaging and entertaining ways to achieve the same results during play.

### BE OPEN

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If a new rule represents dark secrets or hidden dangers, make sure your players understand it. Confusion and frustration about the mysterious ways the universe works are appropriate for many characters, but should not be problems their players must also deal with. GMs who are clear about the intent of a new rule may find their players have useful suggestions about how to better develop and improve these rules to make them more entertaining, useful, and engaging.

## OPTIONAL RULES EXAMPLES

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The following section includes some common optional rules and the subgenres in which they feature. These rules can be used in addition to those in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*. They won't be appropriate for every group or subgenre, but they provide examples of how to customize *Fantasy AGE* rules to suit certain campaigns.

### GRAVE WOUNDS

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In some subgenres, damage done to characters is lasting. Barring healing magic or other exceptional methods, characters may take weeks or months to recover from the effects of wounds. These campaigns make characters understandably cautious, while making armor and other protective measures important.



In normal *Fantasy AGE*, character heal after 6 hours of restful sleep, gaining Health equal to 10 + Constitution + level. This allows for rapid recovery from most illnesses.

With this new rules option, healing takes place at a much slower rate, granting the above healing only on the first day of rest. Afterwards, any additional damage heals at a rate of Constitution per day. Poor rest or insufficient medical treatment halves this rate. This option allows characters to still rapidly recover from light wounds and superficial damage, but makes it difficult to get up and keep going when the damage is significant.

Furthermore, poor conditions or infection can actually worsen a character's condition. In such conditions, characters take 1d6 damage per day. In truly abysmal conditions, this increases to 2d6 per day. This means without proper care, characters cannot heal and may even perish.

**SUBGENRE:** Horror fantasy, historical fantasy, post-apocalyptic fantasy, and any subgenre with horror or gritty undertones

## HEALTH IS EVERYTHING

In horror fantasy and some other subgenres, characters are forcibly removed from play not only by death, but also by madness and other threats. In this subgenre, Health comes to represent not only physical integrity, but also a character's mental and spiritual ability to weather madness, despair, and calamity. Weird fantasy campaigns sometimes use this option to represent bizarre events and maddening occurrences that can eventually destroy a character's sanity or mutate them beyond recognition.

When a character reaches 0 Health, they are in danger of being permanently removed from play, but this "death" can be metaphorical based on how the final blow is dealt. Depending on what caused the character to lose all their Health, they may go permanently insane, give up all ambitions and social relations and retreat into seclusion, or otherwise leave the campaign. These endings may lead to eventual death, but not necessarily.

### WHAT ABOUT MAGES?

GMs seeking to use the Health is Everything optional rule may note that it favors warriors and to a lesser extent rogues when it comes to survival, even when the threats are mental or spiritual in nature. This is because in most horror fantasy and other subgenres where these rules are appropriate, magic places the user in some increased jeopardy for a bad end. This rule presumes this to be the case and thus leaves mages with lower Health than other classes. This is balanced somewhat by the fact that mages are more likely to have high Willpower, which would often be used to resist the effects of fear and madness which might degrade a character's Health.

GMs still concerned they are disadvantaging mages too much with this option can simply give all classes the same amount of Health. This makes warriors slightly less capable of soaking up more damage than their companions, but with armor and generally high Constitution, they will still be able to withstand shocks and terror better than most.

In campaigns that use this option, demons, spirits, and other adversaries are given specialized attacks that deal damage through fear and terror, often affecting characters who fail a particular test. These tests usually use a creature's Strength or Willpower to attack a target's Willpower (Courage or Self-Discipline), with the target taking damage on a failure. These abilities may also assign penalties to actions, such as the spectre's Terror special quality in the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook*.

Great suffering and stress also damage characters who cannot weather their effects. A character can usually avoid this damage by succeeding at a Willpower-based test. Focuses such as Faith, Courage, and Self-Discipline usually help with these tests. Damage is dealt based on the level of shock or stress. Being surprised by a dead body might do 1d3 damage, but only the first few times it happens. Seeing one's spouse or child killed may do 3d6 or more damage and is something a character would never get used to.

In campaigns where wild magic and corrupting energies are capable of warping flesh and minds, hazards and other events sometimes do nonphysical but lasting damage using these rules. In such campaigns, a mystic fog might cause a character to forget themselves and wander the world as a nigh-mindless drone, or a strange plague might cause madness or catatonia.

When a character reaches 0 Health, they can still be saved within a number of rounds equal to 2 + Constitution, though the assistance required to do so is often based on their final wounds. For example, a character driven mad by staring into the eyes of a dead god will need spiritual or mental assistance, not physical healing.

In some campaigns, Health might be renamed to indicate that it encompasses a wider range of harm. Suggestions include Fortune, Stress, and Mortality. This is not required, but some groups find such names flavorful and atmospheric.

**SUBGENRE:** Fantasy horror, weird fantasy

## CORRUPTING POWER

In some subgenres, power can corrupt the spirit. If a character pushes themselves too much when casting spells or channeling mystic energies, they run the risk of losing themselves and becoming a pawn to dark powers. This effect is usually tied to bonuses that characters can use if they want—but if a character pushes themselves too far, they will cease to be a playable character and become a vile, twisted, and corrupt pawn of dark forces.

With this option, a character can accept a temporary Corruption point to do one of four things:

- Immediately recover Health or Magic Points equal to 2d6 + Willpower.
- Gain 2 stunt points to use on their current action, even if they didn't roll doubles.
- Take an additional major action.
- Cast a spell without spending Magic Points. The spell's Spellpower is increased by 2.

Characters can accept as many temporary Corruption points as they want during play. However, at the end of each session, they must roll a d6. If the total rolled is equal to or less than

the total of the temporary Corruption points gained during the session plus their permanent Corruption, they gain a point of permanent Corruption.

Even if they didn't accept any temporary Corruption during a given session, characters who already have any permanent Corruption must roll to see if they gain permanent Corruption at the end of every session. This prevents players from using temporary Corruption to win battles and augment actions until it gets too high and then refusing to use it later to remain safe from future danger. Thus a character cannot be "only a little bit corrupt" and remain safe, though not using Corruption actively slows its spread.

Once a character has more Corruption than their Willpower, they fall. They become too evil, inhuman, or twisted to continue as a playable character. They may become an NPC in the game, but their PC days are over unless some great quest is completed to bring them back to the light. In some campaigns, only certain character types are allowed to draw upon Corruption, such as only mages or servants of certain gods.

One-shot games using this rule accelerate the corruption process. Players roll for permanent Corruption at the end of each encounter and again at the end of the game to see if the character falls to darkness and evil in a tragic epilogue after the adventure concludes.

**SUBGENRE:** Horror fantasy, some post-apocalyptic or weird fantasy where corrupting magic or dark forces feature prominently

## RENAMING CHARACTER TRAITS

This option is less a rule and more a filter applicable to some subgenres. If desired, abilities, talents, focuses, and even classes can be renamed to evoke a subgenre. For example, a Japanese-themed historical fantasy game might call warriors *bushi* or *samurai*, rogues *ninja*, and mages *shugenja* or *onmyoji*. The Heavy Blades focus might become *Kenjutsu*, and the Quick Reflexes talent *Iado*. Likewise, a gritty urban fantasy game inspired by film noir and detective fiction might change Willpower to Guts and Intelligence to Smarts, while changing the Chirurgy Talent to Sawbones and renaming warriors to soldiers or heavies.

The mechanics of these traits don't change – this is in fact very important to avoid confusion – but they take on appropriate new names for the campaign. Renaming character traits can be a lot of work and may confuse players unless the terms are easy to understand and well documented. However, it is a relatively simple alteration that some groups find very useful for helping set the mood.

**SUBGENRE:** Any, though this is most often seen in historical fantasy and martial arts fantasy with certain cultural or genre-specific terms well understood by a whole group.

## SUPPLY RATING

In most campaigns, it is presumed that characters can keep their equipment in good working order and otherwise maintain themselves provided exceptional circumstances don't rob them of water, food, tools, and other supplies. However, in certain campaigns, keeping a character fresh and in peak



operating condition is a struggle. This is common in post-apocalyptic fantasy, but it is not exclusive to this subgenre.

While it is possible to track every resource and its effects, this optional rule represents overall upkeep of a character and their gear. This is represented by a Supply Rating. A character's Supply Rating represents whether they possess enough rations, water, and tools to keep themselves and their equipment working well. Supply Ratings typically range between 0 and 5, though exceptionally well-stocked characters or groups may have higher ratings.

Supplies are diminished at regular intervals and by events, such as goblins raiding the party's campsite or bad weather spoiling supplies. If their supplies run out, a character starts suffering penalties to actions. When a character's Supply Rating reaches 0, they suffer a -1 penalty to all actions where a lack of proper supplies would affect performance. In the case of weapons and armor, damage and Armor Ratings are decreased by 1 to represent equipment in poor condition. Prolonged periods without replenishing a Supply Rating above 0 may increase this penalty, at the GM's discretion. Supplies are replenished in towns, cities, trading posts, or anywhere else characters can realistically acquire more rations and supplies.

Some campaigns might divide the Supply Rating into two subcategories: food and water, and equipment. In this case, running out of food and water imposes penalties on character actions and can eventually cause loss of Health or even death. Poor equipment affects only tests where tools, weapons, and equipment are used, but it could result in tools and weapons eventually becoming broken and useless. Supply Ratings are only appropriate for groups who are willing to track resources and their usage more than the default *Fantasy AGE* campaign, but this approach is appropriate in certain subgenres.

## INVESTIGATION STUNTS (FANTASY AGE)

SP Cost	STUNT
1-3	<b>AHA!</b> The GM reveals a single useful fact about the subject of your test per SP spent. It must be a fact you could normally detect or discover.
1	<b>FLASHBACK:</b> This test reminds you of something important you forgot. The GM reveals the identity or existence of another source of new information you didn't know about.
2	<b>INTUITION:</b> The GM reveals a fact about the object of your test you could not have noticed or deduced simply by interacting with it.
3	<b>LUCKY BREAK:</b> This test's result fortuitously leads to putting two and two together later. Treat one irrelevant focus as applicable to the next test you make detect a clue, discover a lead, or investigate a mystery.
4	<b>DOWN THE RABBIT HOLE:</b> Gain an additional source of information, lead, or contact relating a new mystery or investigation.
5	<b>BREAKTHROUGH:</b> You gain not only information, but also some form of incontrovertible proof relating to the subject of your investigation.

**SUBGENRE:** Post-apocalyptic fantasy, some mazes and monsters campaigns focusing heavily on having proper equipment, and historical fantasy campaigns based on extended military campaigns

## CINEMATIC ACROBATICS

Also known as lightfoot kung fu, this rule represents a staple of martial arts fantasy that reflects how trained warriors and mystics can leap through the air, run up walls, or even seem to fly for short distances. This is generally a function of martial arts skill and thus is not given to every character in the setting, but it almost always includes the player characters in such campaigns.

Cinematic acrobatics allow a character to use their Speed to move along any surface or leap a distance equal to their Speed in yards without requiring special powers or tests. Thus a character with Speed 10 could run 10 yards up a wall or leap 10 yards across a clearing without making any special effort. Acting directly on another character or obstacle would still require tests, but as long as characters are simply moving throughout the setting, they can ignore most conventional terrain and obstacles — such is the strength of their martial skill!

**SUBGENRE:** Martial arts fantasy, though some high-end swashbuckling fantasy campaigns may also adopt this rule

## INVESTIGATION STUNTS

Investigation stunts appear in *Fantasy AGE's* sister game, *Modern AGE*. However, they are very appropriate to urban fantasy games, which often take the forms of mysteries, procedurals, and detective stories. In campaigns where characters to are regularly investigating crimes, seeking missing persons, or otherwise engaging in detective work, these stunts may provide useful options beyond the regular Exploration and Roleplaying Stunt tables.

These stunts, though underused in other types of fantasy, become a useful addition to these types of games. They are not exactly as presented in *Modern AGE* (italics), having been slightly altered to fit the differences between the two games. You can find them on the **Investigation Stunts** table at left.

Unlike some stunt tables, investigation stunts require a bit of GM moderation to avoid charging characters SP for nothing. For example, if there are no more useful facts to provide about a subject, the GM should not let the player spend SP to use many of these stunts. However, even this result is useful in investigations, as it tells players their characters have all the facts they need to solve the mystery.

Other stunts can be borrowed or adapted from other AGE games for use in *Fantasy AGE* if desired. However, GMs should take care to not overwhelm players with too many stunt tables — pick only additions that will be of particular utility in specific campaigns.

**SUBGENRE:** Urban fantasy, historical fantasy, and horror fantasy campaigns based heavily on police work or investigation



## BUILDING EPIC CAMPAIGNS

Eventually, many campaigns reach a point where the heroes are very powerful and experienced. They have faced numerous lesser threats and are beginning to reach a “been there, done that” attitude toward major adventures and even campaign arcs. In *Fantasy AGE*, this often happens at the higher levels, between 16 and 20. By this point characters have numerous talents and specializations and are capable of standing their ground against demon lords and dragons. Challenging heroes at this point in a campaign can be tricky, and so can rewarding them in meaningful ways. This situation usually requires shifting the campaign to an epic scale and style, where the characters’ actions affect the whole world.

Some campaigns strive for an epic feel at all times. While the heroes might not be able to change the world right away, these campaigns always convey a sense of grand adventure, great power, and bold responsibilities beyond killing monsters for loot. This chapter focuses on how to craft epic campaigns at any level, bringing this often high-powered and world-shaking play style to your gaming table.

Much of the advice in this chapter is complimentary to that found in the GM section of the *Fantasy AGE Basic Rulebook* and other parts of this guide. GMs should familiarize themselves with all these sections when designing epic campaigns.

### PLAYER EXPECTATIONS

If a GM knows their group well and what their players expect from epic-style play and campaigns, they can likely skip this

part. This isn’t because they don’t need to take this step, but because they’ve already done so. For everyone else, it never hurts to ask your players what epic-style play means to them.

Different players expect different things from epic campaigns. Some view epic play as high-level play with grand battles and their characters ruling and conquering kingdoms. Others want a sense of legendary or mythic scope, even in otherwise mundane activities like drinking contests and travel. Some players may always find dragons or other types of creatures to be epic in feel; others may be put off by the idea of such features being overused. Without being alerted to these expectations, GMs run the risk of accidentally crafting a campaign they hope feels epic but the players view as a bit like doing their taxes.

### COMMUNICATION IS KEY

The best way to avoid this problem is simply to talk to the players and ask them what they expect from epic adventures, stories, and campaigns. These inquiries can be formal or informal, written or part of a discussion in person or via chat or email, one-on-one or in a group meeting. Whatever works best for the group and gets everyone communicating is great. While not every player in a group may agree on every element that goes into an epic campaign, by talking with their players even briefly, GMs will quickly get a sense of the overarching expectations and shared ideas of their groups. This will help them tailor their games to get the best play experience.

# EPIC THREATS

While building adversaries is discussed extensively elsewhere in **CHAPTER 7: BUILDING MONSTERS & ADVERSARIES**, it is worth identifying exactly what makes epic threats so grand in scale and scope. Appropriate adversaries for epic campaigns aren't just high-powered: They are loaded with a sense of significance in the campaign and setting. Epic adversaries often possess grand ambitions and goals. At times, they are difficult if not impossible to defeat by traditional means.

## ICONIC BUT DISTINCT

The best epic adversaries seem iconic in some way but still possess their own style and personality. Giants, dragons, demons, and similar "big nasties" from fantasy genres make an excellent starting point for epic threats, since players are conditioned by media and past gaming experiences to register these types of monsters as significant. The same goes for character types such as great kings and queens, powerful wizards, heroic knights, and crusading demigods. By having characters and creatures that invoke or emulate these sorts of threats, allies, and foils in a campaign, your adventure will begin to naturally take on an epic feel.

The problem is, many of these classic sources of epic storytelling and play have grown stale in the eyes of many players. They've fought dragons. They slew the giant. And that giant over there. And his cousin. They've saved so many noble kings and graceful queens that it feels like clocking in at the office. And even if they haven't, then they've still seen it done or read about it in countless novels, games, movies, and TV shows.

So what to do? How does a GM keep the epic feel and iconic evocative feel of classic tales of grand adventure while not being repetitive and boring? While the exact method varies from player to player and group to group, the strategy is

### LOW-LEVEL CAMPAIGNS

Anyone who is a fan of various high-fantasy tales like Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* series knows that epic doesn't always mean level 20 characters fighting demigods and demonic giants at the gates of hell. However, in many fantasy games, "epic" tends to mean just that: extremely high-level play against very challenging foes.

GMs used to this sort of epic play seeking to try their hand at lower-level epic campaigns should be careful they don't overwhelm or unbalance their games by introducing these elements. For example, adding a powerful adversary to a campaign can promote an epic feel, but such adversaries can also easily kill most characters in direct confrontation, so care must be exercised in using them. Likewise, powerful artifacts or NPC allies can make players feel like their characters are merely along for the ride. When including any of these potentially unbalancing elements, make sure your players and their characters remain at the center of the action and are capable of surviving the challenges placed before them.

always the same: either take the old and make it new, or take the new and make it feel old.

## MAKING THE OLD NEW

Existing ideas and concepts are comfortable, easy to understand, and familiar. They also bore some groups to tears, especially if they are expecting something grand, challenging, and epic. Even fantasy favorites like dragons and giants can grow old if overused. To make things more difficult, the GM can't control what experiences a group might have had. Even if you've never used a dragon as a threat before your upcoming grand epic *Fantasy AGE* campaign, if your players killed a dozen dragons in their last two games, they may not be all that impressed by your adversaries.

The best solution to this problem when it arises is to take the threat you want to use and customize, alter, or otherwise change it to feel new and thus newly challenging. Classic archetypes and creatures can be combined with other ideas or stories to make something new. Elements of other genres and media can be included to make things feel fresh, while maintaining the familiarity that makes such established threats so useful and enduring. Perhaps your dragons are vampiric in nature, feasting on blood and gaining dark necromantic powers. Maybe your giants were a race of dwarves that angered the gods and were transformed as punishment. What if demons in your setting were all fae creatures who learned a way to devour human souls, making them outcasts among their own kind and horrible threats? There are endless combinations of classic and new ideas. GMs seeking more guidance can consult both **CHAPTER 7: BUILDING MONSTERS & ADVERSARIES** of this book and the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* for help altering adversaries both mechanically and conceptually.

Note that fiction does this all time. Some examples include taking marauding giants and combining them with elements of zombies and a touch of body horror in the anime and manga series *Attack on Titan*; melding imagery of the grim reaper and other classical depictions of death with stories of risen undead warriors to create the Ringwraiths in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*; and films such as the *Dawn of the Dead* remake and *28 Days Later* turning traditionally slow, ambling zombies into tireless, running berserkers.

## MAKING THE NEW OLD

New creatures, character types, and other elements of an epic campaign are refreshing and exciting. They represent new challenges, threats, and encounters. Sometimes encountering a new monster or type of character by itself can form the basis of a whole adventure. However, in epic campaigns, where a feeling of grand scope and great purpose is key, new elements can sometimes feel like novelties or one-shot encounters with minimal impact.

This problem is largely avoided by taking these new creations and merging them with established or expected elements in the campaign. Context is key, and linking new, even bizarre creations to classic or known elements provides this context quickly and easily. If your newly crafted three-headed beasts of pure chaos and endless hunger mostly fill the same role as evil gods and demon lords in a campaign, their differences can shine while their familiarities help the

While many events and encounters in epic campaigns feature similarly impressive locations, there is something to be said for the unexpectedly mundane encounter that later turns out to be important. Perhaps the characters meet the god of secrets in a run-down old tavern, discovering only later who the old man who gave them directions truly was. Perhaps the treaty between the demon lord and the forces of humanity that ends a terrible war is signed in a modest church in an exceedingly humble part of the kingdom.

Amazing locales and grand backdrops are the stuff of many an epic campaign, but at times less is more. The occasional understated scene or mundane place that becomes significant later can really hammer an encounter home, especially if the players are becoming used to castles made of living rock or scarlet waterfalls where siren goddesses lure heroes to their deaths.

players place these new creations in the proper context. If magic in your setting is defined by the influence of mystical “colors” but each color maps to a specific arcana or type of elemental spirit, players can embrace the epic while still understanding how it all works.

Much like making old threats feel new, fiction makes the new feel old all the time. Some classic examples include making ultra-powerful unknowable aliens the callous and horrifying gods of H.P. Lovecraft’s Cthulhu Mythos, granting cursed mummies powers and motivations similar to classic vampires in the various Universal Studios *Mummy* films, and Mike Mignola’s filling the role of the evil lich or undead sorcerer with an elder god-mutated Rasputin in the *Hellboy* comic series and films.

## EPIC LOCATIONS

Epic characters and monsters don’t exist in a vacuum. They need grand and terrible places to interact with. Similarly, players will tend to “up their game” when they are in epic locations, inherently understanding that a battle in the throne room of a great empire is generally more significant than one in a back alley. Note that sometimes these impressions are wrong, but even that contrast can at times be powerful.

Locations have the disadvantage of usually not being able to directly interact with characters the way NPCs can, but they possess the advantage of permanence. A location usually remains for a whole campaign unless destroyed by some great calamity. This gives a place a sense of lasting significance, just as its possible destruction is a clear signal of great and lasting change.

Epic locations in existing fiction include Camelot of the Arthurian legends, the Mines of Moria in Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings*, and Themiscyra, the mythical land of the Amazons in both Greek myth and DC Comics.

## A SENSE OF HISTORY

Epic locations are often tied to the campaign world’s history, or even its prehistory or creation. While sometimes a location becomes significant through an event that transforms it during the campaign, most are established places that were once the sites of great battles, important events, or world-shaking disasters. GMs don’t need to detail every single event that happened in such places, but having a couple notable events to relate to the party, especially to characters

well-versed in lore or history, is useful in setting the tone and atmosphere during play.

### EXAMPLE

*Walt needs the site of a grand battle for his epic Fantasy AGE campaign. As his campaign involves the secret history of the dwarven people, ancient infernal magic, and the hopeful reclamation of a monster-infested land for resettlement, he creates a new location for the battle, the Field of Garamour. He decides this expanse of land, now a crumbling ruin, was once the site of a great battle where a dwarven paladin felled a lord of Hell. However, the land fell under the demon’s death curse and has fallen to ruin, becoming a haven for various foul monsters.*

## SHOW, DON’T TELL

A bit of exposition is unavoidable, and sometimes the best way to relate the history or significance of a place to a group is to tell them, either directly or through an NPC. However, in most cases you should introduce a location, especially its epic elements, through the characters interacting with it. An enchanted pool’s effects should become apparent when a character drinks from it, and the lost cave of the dragon god should reveal its secrets to the character who dares to delve deep within.

Locations can also make themselves known by how they affect characters. Cursed places may afflict characters or turn people into monsters. Blessed locations might provide special bonuses and benefits. Special stunts may be possible in certain locations, or a location may make certain stunts easier—a testament to the site’s legacy or power.

### EXAMPLE

*Walt decides to jazz up the Field of Garamour a bit, noting that it has a curse from a dying demon but was also the site of a great victory over evil. He decides that demonic or corrupt creatures in the location are empowered by the curse and gain a +1 bonus on attack and damage rolls. However, as a testament to the paladin’s great victory in this place, he also decides that those facing demonic or corrupt creatures gain 1 additional stunt point whenever they roll doubles. These changes reflect the power of the location and make it likely that characters will seek to use or avoid the location based on their personality and inclinations, as befits an epic location.*

## EPIC EVENTS

The great quest. The gathering of the high kings and queens. The discovery of the ancient secret that will shake the world. These events are an important part of epic storytelling and epic play. Epic campaigns are often a collection of adventures and encounters centered around such grand events, and properly choosing and crafting them is important.

Epic events in roleplaying campaigns generally have two important elements. First, they show a world greater than what the characters find just outside their door. Second, they show how or why the heroes are important while simultaneously making sure everyone understands it's not all about them.

Epic events in fiction include the Fellowship gathering at Rivendell in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, the holy grail quest of the Arthurian legends, and the twelve labors of Hercules in Greek mythology.

## A LARGER WORLD

Epic events showcase the grandeur and wonder of a campaign. They may be triumphant or tragic, but either way they illustrate the important occurrences and happenings of the campaign and why they matter. The themes of these events are often powerful, usually direct, and rarely subtle. If the campaign is centered around a war for rulership of a kingdom, then the assassination of the old king, a grand gathering of the great noble houses, and the arrival of the king's lost heir are all appropriate events.

### EXAMPLE

*Looking for a major event to start off her new epic Fantasy AGE campaign involving three warring kingdoms, a lost heir, and a prophecy that speaks of a rise of great evil, Priscilla wants something that will hint at things to come while still allowing events to build to a climax later in the campaign. After some consideration, she decides on the coronation of the queen of one of the warring kingdoms as the opening event, where dignitaries from the other kingdoms are in attendance for the first time in generations. She also decides the court wizard will deliver an important prophecy during this event. These elements combine to make the queen's coronation an affair to remember.*

This doesn't mean these events always go as planned, simply that they usually start that way. A GM should provide just enough structure for everyone to appreciate how significant it is when the heroes or another important character push things thoroughly off the rails through their actions.

## THE BIG PICTURE

One common theme in epic stories and campaigns is the focus on the big picture. The characters attend events where they meet characters that illustrate to them how important their actions are in the grand scheme of things. Sure, they could just take the money and run, but who would save the

countless innocents left to their fate? Of course, their brother could become king, but is he truly fit to rule? These types of dilemmas are excellent ways to introduce the characters and the players to the idea that something very big is happening in the campaign, and it won't be solved simply by swinging a sword a few times. It will take time, devotion, and sacrifice.

### EXAMPLE

*At the queen's coronation, Priscilla plans to have the prophecy delivered by the court wizard hint at the dangers of allowing the kingdoms to continue their war, but the wizard also suggests there are hard choices and great challenges ahead. The heroes will remember these words when everything starts to go wrong...*

GMs should remember that steering characters toward the big picture is not the same as railroading them or stealing player agency. Players still guide their characters, and they might still follow paths the GM didn't expect.

## IMPORTANT CALAMITIES

While significant occurrences aren't always disasters or battles, in the combat-facing entertainment that is fantasy role-playing, they usually are. From assassinations to destroying whole cities, the go-to epic event is the calamity. This means that players tend to expect these sorts of events, and GMs should give them what they want—but not to the point of being predictable or boring.

Epic campaigns should include plenty of grand battles, scenes of devastation, and other calamities. In many cases these events should be at the center of the plots, quests, and encounters that help define the campaign. On the other hand, sometimes grand and important happenings should be less dire or violent. The occasional royal wedding, festival, or even divine intervention help break up constant wars and explosions, making everything feel more varied and important.

## EPIC RESPONSIBILITIES

One common theme in epic campaigns is "if not us, who?" The threats that heroes in epic, high-level campaigns face are often so dangerous and widespread only heroes of the PCs' ability have any chance of defeating them. Refusing to face a foe isn't just a matter of losing a payday or moving on to the next adventure: There is a very real risk of world-changing effects.

GMs should not be afraid to have epic adversaries change the setting if the heroes refuse or utterly fail to stop them. If the adventurers are too busy to stop the demigoddess of death and ruin from raising an undead army and claiming half the continent as her own, well, then that's what she does—and now they need to deal with this new, terrifying status quo.

Even so, one failure to act or stop a threat should not end a campaign. Even devastating effects should be fixable, or at least survivable. However, when play reaches this style and power level, the heroes can change the world—so it's also okay to change it if they refuse to stop a threat equal to their might.



### EXAMPLE

*The heroes in Priscilla's game have decided to take a bribe and position of power offered by a monarch who is secretly in league with a conspiracy to subjugate the land. For a time, this deal works out fine, with the characters living in luxury and going on unrelated and lucrative adventures. Unfortunately, the evil monarch and his allies, unopposed by the heroes, eventually manage to conquer a neighboring kingdom, where they begin to commit various atrocities which endanger the party's allies. The heroes are now compelled to act, but the delay of their involvement will make things more difficult.*

## EPIC REWARDS

Many campaigns feature various magic items, honorifics, companions, and treasure ranging from the minor to the magnificent. However, epic-level rewards go even a bit further. This is both a matter of significance and one of style. Epic rewards tend to come with additional powers and abilities, but also additional history and obligations. Where a warrior in a typical campaign might have a magic sword with a cool name and interesting backstory, in an epic campaign the warrior might have a weapon that was once used by a god to slay a demon lord and is the only key to opening the prison where the demon's defeated army is confined.

Most epic rewards come with a sense of history or are notably at the beginning of their history. The heroes may receive an ancient sword with a thousand-year history and which once

belonged to a line of god-kings and sorcerer-knights. Or they might be gifted an amazing new weapon that was just made for them by a master smith, possibly with the help of an archmage, demigod, or similar luminary. A title bestowed upon the heroes is often an ancient one that was once held by great heroes and leaders, but it could also be a new and unique honor created solely for them.

## POWER IS NICE, BUT SIGNIFICANCE IS SWEETER

Epic rewards are often powerful, but they need not be. "A master-worked blade with a grand history that is the symbol of an ancient and honored office" will always be more epic than "an axe that gives a +2 bonus on attacks and deals an additional 2d6 damage." Artifacts might not even work properly or completely for lower-level heroes, but that doesn't mean they aren't important to the campaign—especially if the artifact holds the key to effecting some grand change in the world.

GMs should feel free to make epic rewards powerful if they feel it suits their campaign, but powerful or not, they should always be significant. If a reward isn't cherished and important, it's not much of a reward, especially for an epic campaign filled with grand and memorable events and challenges.

## ARTIFACTS & SPECIAL POWERS

Artifacts are items of great power detailed in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*, and they make particularly appropriate rewards



## DIVINE-CLASS THREATS & MORTAL HEROES

GMs can use the rules suggestions and options meant to elevate heroes and their peers to godlike status to create divine-class threats for their campaigns featuring mortal protagonists. Perhaps the heroes anger the goddess of death and she shows up to knock them around, or they awaken the ancient dragon god from its slumber and it decides to unleash its heavenly might on the campaign world.

Such threats can be absolutely terrifying and appropriate to the genre or style of a campaign. But the unevenness of moral-versus-god conflicts in *Fantasy AGE* can be very frustrating when the heroes are on the mortal side. A brave warrior who spends their turns impotently battering a half-naked demigod before being nearly killed with one backhanded blow will definitely get the sense of their foe's power, but their player might not be having any fun. A mage who throws every spell they have at a target only to find out they're basically unable to affect that enemy for more than a moment may be impressed by their foe's divine might, but their player may be just be irritated.

Such threats should be used, if at all, extremely sparingly and only when appropriate for the genre and campaign. Facing the eldritch horror from beyond the stars that can be defeated only with the use of an ancient artifact might be a good time to allow a divine-class threat to knock the heroes around some. But for a nasty demon lord you expect the heroes to ultimately defeat in battle, don't grant abilities that suggest fighting the foe is pointless. If you do, make it very clear that these conditions are temporary and will disappear once certain requirements are met (such as being blessed by the high priest of a certain religion, drinking from a legendary fountain, and so forth).

in epic campaigns. Artifacts almost always come with their own histories and limitations that add to the campaign. Artifacts also have the advantage that many fantasy fans expect them in epic stories and will consider games that feature them inherently more epic.

### EXAMPLE

*In his Fantasy AGE campaign, Evan wants to give the heroes an epic reward for their efforts. His campaign involves a plague among the elves, which is transforming them into powerful but unstable half-dead aberrations. Evan decides that the "Starsword" of a corrupted elven king will fall into the players' hands. The weapon has great powers, but because the characters are relatively low-level, Evan plans to have these abilities unlocked over time using the rules for **Locked Artifacts** on page 61 of the *Fantasy AGE Companion*.*

Special powers are also a great way to reward players in epic play. The best powers are often ones that grow a character's abilities laterally, making them more able to handle diverse or unusual situations. Powers which augment a character's

strengths are often unappreciated unless they provide serious and potentially unbalancing benefits.

### EXAMPLE

*In Evan's game, the heroes save a sacred spring once revered by the elves but now targeted by their half-dead brethren. As a reward, each player is allowed to drink from the spring. Evan considers having the spring increase the characters' abilities or strengthen their combat or magical powers, but he decides that a handful of significant but unrelated powers will make the heroes seem more unique. He informs the players their characters can now understand all elven languages, even the ancient tongues thought lost to the world; they will not age for the next 50 years; and they are considered to be elves for any artifacts and magic that specifically target or benefit elvenkind. These abilities are less potent than higher Strength or additional spells, but they place the heroes in an exclusive group that makes their accomplishments feel more significant.*

Of course, not every group will feel the same about every reward. Some expect high-powered bonuses and rewards for epic play. In these cases, the GM should accommodate the players while still trying make these rewards feel distinct.

## HIGH-POWERED OR GODLIKE CAMPAIGNS

A subset of the epic campaign worth mentioning is the "god game." In it heroes are gods, demigods, or other very powerful beings who interact with similarly powerful beings. This may occur in a regular campaign after a certain event, or it might be the whole premise of a campaign where the players start out by creating level 1 "godlings" who are weak by the standards of divinity but still far above most mortals. In some game groups, the god game is what is expected and desired whenever epic play or epic campaigns are mentioned.

Running the god game can be difficult, as it requires regular use of potent beings while still having players interact with weaker mortals who often require aid or direction from the heroes and their peers. NPCs can already be fragile and tricky to develop in some games, and this becomes even more difficult when an angry player can dispose of a character on a whim.

Mechanically, a game of this extreme power level is fairly easy, especially if using the **Play Options** chapter of the *Fantasy AGE Companion* and applying the results unevenly. Godlike characters, monsters, and other beings can be given special abilities using these rules which only they possess, making them well above other beings. A divine character could receive a flat damage bonus of +1d6 or greater when attacking all non-divine-class targets and a higher Armor Rating when facing attacks from such threats, and all mortal-class characters could be assigned a Minion Rating usable only by divine-class characters and adversaries to dispose of them. Further, this Minion Rating could be used in any interaction, if desired, to represent total domination of the target. Mob rules can allow heroes to lay waste to whole armies with only a few attacks. In this fashion, even the mightiest mortals would learn to fear the gods and their progeny.

## EXAMPLE

*Crystal is running her new campaign, Blood of the Gods, in which the heroes are all children of fallen deities who must oppose a terrible, otherworldly threat to save their world. Crystal wants even level 1 characters to devastate mortal enemies to illustrate how much power and responsibility the heroes possess due to their divine heritage. Looking over CHAPTER 8: PLAY OPTIONS in the Fantasy AGE Companion and considering what she wants a typical “godling” to be able to do, she settles on the following abilities for all divine-class characters, including the PCs: +2 attack bonus and +2d6 to damage rolls against mortal-class targets, +4 Armor Rating against all mortal-class attacks (which stacks with other armor), and mortal-class penetrating and other armor-piercing attacks don’t affect this armor. Crystal then assigns Minion Ratings to various mortal characters in the campaign, allowing even a low-level character to slay a mighty giant, provided the monster doesn’t possess divine-class status itself.*

Special powers may be available to all divine characters. Immortality and rapid healing are common, although such effects are often limited to mortal-class causes so that gods, demons, and other dire beings can still damage and even slay each other. Stunts can also be used to amplify a godlike character, with divine-class characters gaining extra SP when dealing with mortals.

## EXAMPLE

*In her Blood of the Gods campaign, Crystal next decides that all divine-class characters regain Health equal to 1d6+Willpower each round from any attacks that came from a mortal source, and such characters are immune to mortal poisons and diseases. Divine-class characters age very slowly until they reach their chosen ages (defined by their sense of self rather than biology) and then stop aging. Furthermore, when facing any mortal in an encounter, they are given +2 stunt points to use on any action, even those which do not generate stunt points, and they may use stunts that would normally be inappropriate so long as they can justify it through use of their godlike power—such as shouting for a mortal to “sit down” and using the Knock Prone stunt on them. Combined with the other abilities given to divine-class characters, Crystal has created a whole tier of characters who are largely threatened only by those in the same tier.*

Numerous other rules can be added as well, from allowing the heroes to teleport or race around mortal realms at ease to granting them cults or religions using the organization rules in the *Fantasy AGE Companion*. Such rules aren’t “fair” when compared to mortal-class characters, but that’s actually the point—in this sort of campaign, the gods, demigods, and other beings are inherently more powerful in ways that affect nearly everything they do.

Magic and character powers used by godlike characters might cost fewer or even no Magic Points when targeting a mortal. Alternatively, such abilities may operate on a much larger scale, with a *quagmire* spell causing half an army to sink into the muck or a *thunder blast* being powerful enough to level a whole village. Spellpower is often boosted when using

divine-class magic on mortals, or such spells might always work properly and at full potency on lesser threats. GMs are often served by handwaving the exact effects of an immortal god-mage shooting a lightning bolt at a troublesome mortal, or even an unruly town. The end results of such conflicts are really never in question, and it’s often okay to just narrate the result and move on to more significant encounters.

## EXAMPLE

*Later in Crystal’s Blood of the Gods campaign, one of the heroes wants to punish a town that was sacrificing its children to an otherworldly menace the heroes oppose. The character wants to use their lightning storm spell to level the town, with repeated lightning strikes leveling the temple, city hall, and the homes of the most prominent citizens. Though lightning storm normally works only on an area within 20 yards of the character and does potent but not necessarily structure-smashing damage, Crystal decides the character’s divine power channeled through this spell is more than enough to trash some mortal buildings. She describes the devastation of the spell and the terrified screams of the mortals as the godlings look down on them from a nearby hill...*

Variations of these options and rules are possible, but the general premise remains the same: godlike characters function on a whole different level from mundane and mortal characters. When mortals face gods, even if they have a chance at victory, the odds should not be in their favor.

## EPIC EXAMPLE

# DYING GODS

Jack has decided to run a Scandinavian-inspired campaign of great monsters, scheming nobles, and the possible end of the world. He wants the heroes to feature prominently in a series of adventures that reveal how the gods of old are dying, leaving the world threatened by a terrifying race of gigantic half-beasts the deities once kept at bay. He wants this game to be truly epic, concluding with a final battle to save the campaign world, so he sits down to consider how to make this happen.

First Jack needs epic threats, events, and locations for his heroes to encounter. The threats part is relatively easy, as he already envisions a massive horde of half-beast humanoids and other anthropomorphic menaces he’s calling the Elukkan, adapted from a Finnish word for “beast or brute.” The Elukkan aren’t a specific creature, but rather a class of monstrous beings that once dominated the world before the old gods destroyed their lords and banished them to another realm. Now, with the gods dying, the Elukkan return. Using the *Fantasy AGE Bestiary* and CHAPTER 7: BUILDING MONSTERS & ADVERSARIES of this book, Jack designs an Elukkan template that can be applied to anything from rats to dragons, creating a class of twisted and terrifying creatures that must be stopped if the world is to be saved.

Of course, just having new monsters isn’t enough. Jack considers how the world is changing from the vibrant place it once was to a darkening land filled with dread and doom. He decides that the release of the Elukkan and decline of the gods are darkening the sky, dropping temperatures, and



lengthening the nights. These conditions make famine more common as crops suffer. Furthermore, constant cold, dark, and dismal conditions wreak havoc on people's health and morale, so that everywhere the heroes travel on their quest, they will find desperate, hungry, unhappy people bereft of hope. Even where the Elukkan don't attack, these things are getting worse. These themes won't be particularly happy, but they will serve to showcase how important the gods were to the world. Jack will convey these themes in various epic locations including great cities declining into sparsely populated ruins, enchanted glades grown ice-covered and dead, and other grand places slowly losing their splendor to the decline of the world. These locations further enforce the themes and tone of the campaign.

Now Jack considers some events for the characters to participate in to give things a suitably epic feel. While he hasn't yet developed the central quest in the campaign, Jack knows he wants events that invoke feelings of grand desperation and decline, but also hope. He decides the game begins with one of the gods falling to earth, mortally injured by the Elukkan. The heroes will witness this event, which will alert them to the crisis and provide hints about what they can do to resolve it. The god will also implore the heroes to seek out its siblings, several other gods and goddesses who are in the last stages of their existence. Throughout the game, the heroes will encounter these gods as they all face their ends in a variety of ways. These

events will help motivate the characters while also setting the tone for various parts of the campaign.

With the stage set, a rough idea of how things will progress, and his campaign world about to end in gloom and gnashing teeth, Jack needs to decide what the heroes can do to alter events and what responsibilities they will need to adopt to save the day. Much like the twilight of the gods in Norse myth, Jack doesn't think there is a way to prevent the death of the old gods, nor can the Elukkan be imprisoned as they once were. Instead, Jack decides the heroes must go on an epic quest to find and drink from the ancient well from which the old gods' knowledge and power stem. This will give the characters the power to vanquish the Elukkan and destroy their king, a gigantic bearlike humanoid capable of crushing an army single-handedly. Jack selects a well as it not only suggests life-giving water and the efforts of humanity, but because it was such a well that gave the Norse god Odin his wisdom and insight, further keeping with the Scandinavian inspirations for this campaign. The bearlike nature of the Elukkan king is also selected for its epic imagery, since the bear is a powerful predator capable of easily killing a normal human.

Jack decides the Elukkan cannot drink from the well themselves—in fact, it is poison to them—but they will do everything they can to prevent the heroes from doing so if they discover this plan. And to keep things epic and interesting, he also decides one cannot simply walk into the cavern where the well of the old gods exists. No, heroes must prove themselves worthy by facing an array of challenges. These challenges will form the core of the campaign, with the characters able to finally reach the well once they have proved their worth. Along the way, the heroes will acquire various items and weapons of wondrous construction and exceptional power, rewards for their epic journey and symbols of their struggles and triumphs.

With the core of his epic campaign set, Jack considers its ending. Since the well gave the old gods their power, it makes sense that it can do the same for the characters and any others they allow to drink from it. These new well-drinkers will become the new gods at the end of the campaign, capable of defeating the Elukkan king and driving its followers into the deep wilderness. The world begins to slowly revitalize under the protagonists' care, though it will never be the same as it was. Jack figures this will likely end the campaign, though he entertains further adventures with the heroes and their protégés, allies, and progeny as newly empowered gods protecting a reborn world from various threats.

This campaign cycle mimics the Norse tale of Ragnarok, as well as certain comic book stories such as Jack Kirby's *Fourth World*, enough that Jack is confident his players will find it suitably epic in scope and style. He now moves on to creating adventures centered around the challenges the heroes will face during the great quest to save their world and ultimately replace the gods of old.

# FANTASY AGE

CAMPAIGN NAME/TITLE

START DATE

## PLAYERS & CHARACTERS

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

PLAYER NAME

CHARACTER SUMMARY

## CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

SUBGENRE

## SETTING

HIGH CONCEPT

STARTING LOCATION(S)

IMPORTANT FEATURES

## CAMPAIGN ARCS

BEGINNER - LEVELS 1-4

GOAL

KEY VILLAIN

KEY CHALLENGES

KEY LOCATIONS

ADEPT - LEVELS 5-8

GOAL

KEY VILLAIN

KEY CHALLENGES

KEY LOCATIONS

EXPERT - LEVELS 9-12

GOAL

KEY VILLAIN

KEY CHALLENGES

KEY LOCATIONS

MASTER - LEVELS 13-17

GOAL

KEY VILLAIN

KEY CHALLENGES

KEY LOCATIONS

LEGENDARY - LEVELS 18-20

GOAL

KEY VILLAIN

KEY CHALLENGES

KEY LOCATIONS

## REWARD MAPPING

### BEGINNER - LEVELS 1-4

HONORIFICS	MEMBERSHIPS	COMPANIONS	MAGIC ITEMS	TREASURE

### ADEPT - LEVELS 5-8

HONORIFICS	MEMBERSHIPS	COMPANIONS	MAGIC ITEMS	TREASURE

### EXPERT - LEVELS 9-12

HONORIFICS	MEMBERSHIPS	COMPANIONS	MAGIC ITEMS	TREASURE

### MASTER - LEVELS 13-17

HONORIFICS	MEMBERSHIPS	COMPANIONS	MAGIC ITEMS	TREASURE

### LEGENDARY - LEVELS 18-20

HONORIFICS	MEMBERSHIPS	COMPANIONS	MAGIC ITEMS	TREASURE

### OPTIONAL RULES - CHECK ALL THAT APPLY

- CINEMATIC ACROBATICS    
  CORRUPTING POWER    
  GRAVE WOUNDS    
  HEALTH IS EVERYTHING    
  INVESTIGATION STUNTS    
  SUPPLY RATING

### STUNT ADDITIONS & MODIFICATIONS

ADDITIONAL COMBAT STUNTS	ADDITIONAL EXPLORATION OR ROLEPLAYING STUNTS

DIVINE STUNTS	LOCATION STUNTS	OTHER STUNT OPTIONS

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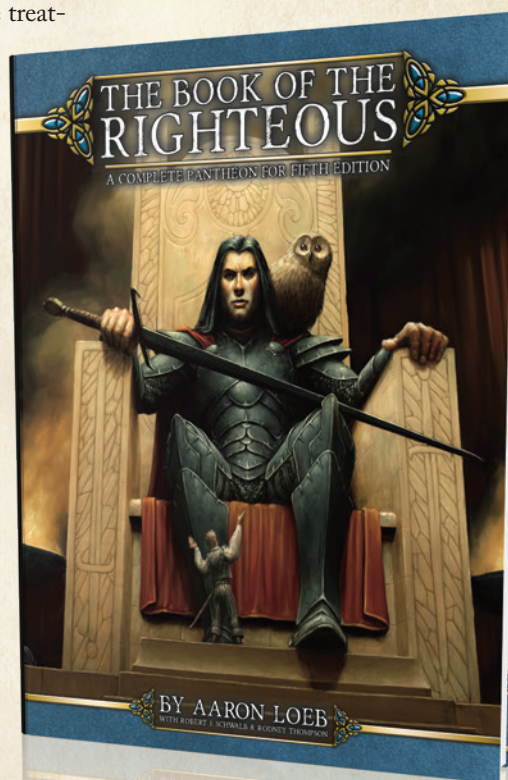
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