

PYRAMID



Issue 3/17 March '10

MODERN EXPLORATION

THE MAP'S DARK SPACES

by Kelly Pedersen



MUMMY AMULETS
by Graeme Davis

SHOVEL BUMS
by Ken Spencer

THE BLACK BOX
by J. Edward Tremlett

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

Stock #37-2617

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You call this archaeology?
– Professor Henry Jones,
*Indiana Jones and
the Last Crusade*

Article Colors

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

Pale Blue: In This Issue

Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

Dark Blue: **GURPS** Features

Purple: Other Features

COVER ART

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IN THIS ISSUE

Do you think there's nothing new under the sun? Then you haven't made a breathtaking discovery while slogging through the sand, sloshing in snow, or sneaking beneath city streets – but after this issue of *Pyramid*, you might.

Using steam-powered technology over a century early to fuel their exploratory urges, the people of Pele-2 begin to fill in *The Map's Dark Spaces*. This alternate Earth and its enigmatic alien artifacts present both opportunity and danger to the Infinity Patrol. Incorporate this timeline into part of a larger **GURPS Infinite Worlds** campaign, or use it as a standalone setting for modern exploration adventures.

The Black Box reveals perhaps the greatest conspiracy in modern exploration – a secret that also keeps secrets. Some discoveries are best kept hidden, and these are the people to do it. Those who assist the Black Box have adventures they would never forget – if only they could remember.

Are **GURPS** explorers traipsing around Egyptian ruins becoming blasé about hordes of corpses coming after them? Graeme Davis, author of **GURPS Vikings** and **GURPS Middle Ages 1**, helps with that problem; simply give *Mummy Amulets* to some select adversaries and watch the heroes regain their respect for the afterlife.

On the more realistic side, *Shovel Bums* looks at the dirty world of real modern-day adventurers. Learn of the talents and techniques of these field archeologists, use the **GURPS** templates and lenses to make your own professional wanderers, and then drop them into the included occult campaign framework that makes best use of these unlikely heroes.

How can a GM add exploration to a modern campaign? Steven Marsh, Pyramid editor, offers one possibility in this month's *Random Thought Table*.

Of course, every exploration adventure worth its weight in gold has “one true” item needed to get past some insurmountable obstacle. *Curious Coins* provides one true artifact – and lots of red herrings – to help the GM add some mystery to the search.

Finally, once you've made it back to civilization, head over to *Odds and Ends* for morsel-sized mini-articles and a bit of humor from *Murphy's Rules*.

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FROM THE EDITOR

DIMINISHING DISCOVERIES, UNLIMITED ADVENTURE

This is the *Modern Exploration* issue of *Pyramid*, a sequel (of sorts) to last month's *Historical Exploration* issue. If all goes according to plan, next month we'll have the final part of our series, where we learn that Luke and Leia are brother and sis – whoops, wrong trilogy.

Later in this issue, we look at one aspect that sets modern exploration apart from its past and future counterparts (*The Accidental Explorer*, pp. 36-37). What we'll note here, in broad strokes, is how rewarding modern exploration can be – especially from a gaming standpoint.

Obviously, the number of discoveries possible by exploration goes down as the timeline approaches the modern age; once something's been explored, it's crossed off the list of potential milestones. (If space exploration picks up with any vigor, we'll see the number of vistas open considerably, but we'll revisit that another day.)

What's interesting, though, is that *because* there are so few discoveries left, those that remain tend to be fairly awesome; they are generally very difficult to reach, require incredible insight or research, and/or have otherwise avoided detection by lesser explorers. On the realistic side, there are the Lascaux cave paintings; likewise, the discovery of the *Titanic* wreckage a couple of

decades ago is another find that is only possible in the modern era. More fantastically, “modern” tales of the discovery of Atlantis have delighted the public for over a century, and Dan Brown has sold millions of books writing about globetrotting investigators who uncover unbelievable conspiracies hundreds (or thousands) of years old.

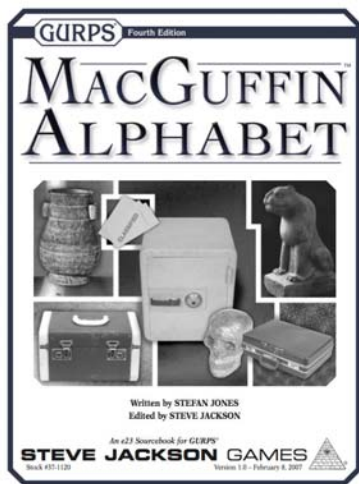
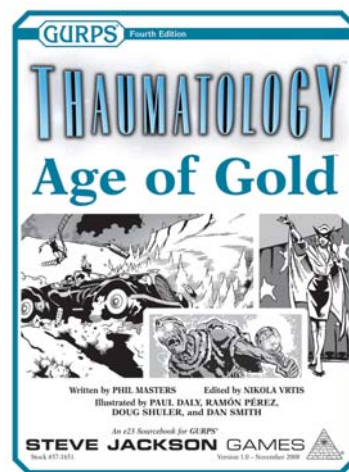
Of course, mention of highly skilled, determined (and lucky) explorers should ring any gamers' ears, since that's the textbook description of most PCs. “Rare modern exploration discoveries” and “gaming heroes” go together like peanut butter and jelly. You

can play a straight exploration campaign, include exploration as a change of pace for any modern-based setting, or mix modern exploration with just about any other genre: horror, cliffhangers, action, conspiracy, magic . . . you name it.

So let your mind wander to new and exciting possibilities involving modern exploration. Who knows what you'll discover?

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Speaking of discoveries, did you uncover something so amazing in this issue that you want to encourage us to keep doing that? Or so horrific that it should have remained buried for all time? If so, send us a note at pyramid@sjgames.com, or visit our electronic archeological site at forums.sjgames.com.



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THE MAP'S DARK SPACES

BY KELLY PEDERSEN

Humans have explored the unknown for time out of mind. They have many reasons to do so: fame, wealth, power, ideology. Perhaps the most universal motivation is *curiosity*. We want to go over the hill, journey through the forest, sail beyond the shore – all because we don't know what we'll see there. Almost all alternate Earths of the *GURPS Infinite Worlds* setting conform to this pattern. On Homeline, the Industrial Revolution (TL5) and the Mechanized Age (TL6) that followed were great times for exploring “just because.” Technological advances in previous eras made it possible and relatively easy to go to practically any place on the surface of the earth. When the obviously useful areas of Earth were explored, human curiosity drove people into the regions previously considered too hostile to venture into: dense jungles, deep deserts, frozen wastelands, and high mountains.

On Pele-2, this age of exploration – filling up the spaces on the map that had previously been *terra incognita* – has occurred almost a century earlier. The great civilizations of China and

India have joined Europe in colonizing the globe, and greater cultural contact and competition have spurred faster technological progress. Now, the political powers are sending explorers to map the last blank areas of the world, and they have found something no one ever expected: the ruins of an ancient civilization, spread over the most inhospitable regions of the planet. The major players rush to fund the exploration of these relics, hoping to gain an advantage over their rivals, while the Infinity Patrol and Centrum fund their own expeditions covertly. Pele-2 may discover more than it bargained for.

INFINITE WORLDS

Like Pele-1 in *An Age of Sails* (Pyramid #3/16), Pele-2 is a new timeline for the *Infinite Worlds* setting. Even so, Homeline keeps its activities quiet, so the GM can remove them without changing the flavor, and use this alternate world as a location for adventure by itself.

PELE-2

A world where China and India joined the Age of Exploration at the same time as Europe has encouraged greater cultural mixing and resulted in more balanced competition between the great powers of the world. The increased exchange of ideas and resources has spurred Pele-2's technology above the equivalent period in Homeline, and the timeline has progressed to the beginning of TL6 almost a century earlier. Now, the nations of the world are striking out into the last unexplored areas of the world and finding strange remnants of a lost civilization there.

EAST MEETS WEST IN THE MIDDLE

Pele-2's point of divergence is actually over 5,000,000 years ago, when the magma plume beneath the Pacific Ocean that

formed the Hawaiian island chain suddenly expanded greatly, both in intensity and area. Instead of a Hawaiian archipelago, the result was a single large island, approximately 500 miles long and 200 miles wide, stretching west-northwest from the location of Homeline's Big Island of Hawaii to beyond Kauai. The volcanic activity died down approximately 200,000 years ago, leaving human history mostly unaffected until the arrival of the Polynesians in the Pacific.

The new, greatly enlarged Hawaii enabled the Polynesians to form a stronger presence, allowing them to make longer journeys, including trips to the Asian mainland. Polynesian sailing technology – both shipbuilding and navigating – was added to the maritime cultures of Asia, with far-reaching results. Asian cultures, particularly Southeast Asian civilizations, grew more willing to engage in long-distance trade and travel. As a result, most of the civilizations of Asia were slightly richer than in Homeline.

This article glosses over the early history of Pele-2 for good reason; for folks wanting more detailed information on that era, check out An Age of Sails from Pyramid #3/16: Historical Exploration.

The enlarged trade volumes prompted the next major divergence from Homeline's history. On Pele-2, the Neo-Pala Empire of India was able to conquer the entire subcontinent in the 11th century, funded by profits from the greater trade from the east. Though the Neo-Pala emperors fell within the next two centuries, their legacy of a unified India inspired the three successor states that eventually emerged from the chaos: the Raja of Delhi, the Sena Dynasty of Bengal, and the Deccan Confederation. These three states expanded Indian influence northwest into Afghanistan, east into Burma, and west onto the coast of Africa.

Meanwhile, in China, the Mongols had arrived on schedule, defeating the previous Southern Song Dynasty. However, unlike Homeline, the Song were not completely wiped out. Talented administrators and bureaucrats fled south, forming a new ruling class in many Southeast Asian nations, and the last Song emperor sailed eastward across the sea, to take refuge in Hawaii. From these redoubts, the Song exiles worked to overthrow the Mongol Yuan Dynasty, and as a result, China rid itself of the Mongols even faster than in Homeline's history. However, the Song did not reap the benefits of their labors. Instead, the new Wanyou Dynasty arose, based around a millennial version of Buddhism.

The Wanyou Dynasty set out to convert the rest of the world, by force if necessary. They were stymied in the south, but their campaigns to the northwest and toward Japan went better. The steppe tribes, in particular, quickly adopted the Wanyou's White Lotus traditions. The Wanyou then pushed westward into Central Asia, where they came into conflict with the expanding forces of the Raja of Delhi.

The greatest change from Homeline's history, however, was the discovery by a Chinese captain of the New World in 1482. Colonists from Hawaii (now essentially a Chinese colony) and Lu Daoyu (Homeline Philippines) settled this new land. Columbus made his voyage on schedule, but what he found was not a vast expanse of wilderness and low-technology tribes, but a land already dealing with settlers from the Old World, competition able and willing to interfere with any European attempts. By 1550, European colonists were struggling against the Chinese in the New World and with Indians in Africa, where Indian settlements were making inroads along the East African coast from the Red Sea to the Cape of Good Hope.

THE MARCH OF THE WANYOU

The Wanyou Dynasty of China, while hardly unstoppable, was the greatest political power on Pele-2 from 1343, when the new dynasty was founded, until its fall over 350 years later. The Wanyou conquered vast areas of Central Asia in their drive to bring enlightenment to the world, and they embarked on an ambitious invasion of Japan. The conquest of the Japanese archipelago began in 1490, and the island of Kyushu was occupied by 1500. However, the rest of the islands proved harder to take, and the Wanyou forces made little progress. The speed of the advance was measured not in months or even years, but

Pele-2, 1750

Current Affairs

The great powers of the world are exploring the heretofore blank spaces of their maps of the world, in the hopes of finding advanced technology in the mysterious ruins that have recently been revealed all over the globe.

Divergence Point

5,000,000 years B.C.; larger Pacific magma plume creates much larger Hawaii.

Major Civilizations

Western (multipolar), Chinese (empire with rivals), Indian (empire with rivals).

Great Powers

Spanish Empire (dictatorship, CR4), English Empire (dictatorship, CR4), French Empire (dictatorship, CR4), Gaoyang Dynasty (dictatorship, CR4), Raja of Delhi (dictatorship, CR4), Deccan Confederation (caste, CR3), Hawaii (oligarchy, CR4), Lu Daoyu (republic, CR3).

Worldline Data

TL: 6

Mana Level: Very low (low in alien ruins)

Quantum: 6

Infinity Class: R9

Centrum Zone: Yellow

decades. Nevertheless, by 1550, Shikoku and the southern half of Honshu had fallen to the Chinese forces. Between 1550 and 1570, the Wanyou Dynasty was content to leave the stalemate in place, with its attention diverted to deal with increasing conflicts in its western possessions. However, by 1570, the emperor felt secure to once again commit major forces to the Japanese campaign, spurred by rumors of great wealth coming from the new lands to the east of the ocean. Over the next 25 years, China conquered the remaining major cities of Japan, and the emperor of Japan made formal submission to the emperor of China. However, many Japanese forces retreated to the mountainous interior on the north island of Hokkaido, and Japan remained restive.

The western campaign progressed more smoothly. The Wanyou march was not met by any serious challenge until 1540, when they entered the area northeast of the Caspian Sea (in Homeline Kazakhstan). There, the Indian forces of the Raja of Delhi were supporting local rulers in resisting the Chinese forces. The Raja was not yet willing to directly attack the Wanyou forces, but Indian gold and mercenaries bolstered the cities of the Silk Road, allowing them to present a credible threat to the Chinese.

Since Pele-1 and Pele-2 seem to be echoes of each other (see p. 10), heroes who travel between the Pele worlds might have significant inside knowledge. "Forewarned is forearmed."

At first, China tried a more diplomatic solution, sending the cities bribes and teams of missionaries to attempt to stir up dissent. However, the Silk Road cities were able to resist the subtle erosion of their power, and after a decade of fruitless negotiation, the Chinese lost patience. Their forces began a full-scale invasion of Central Asia, with Chinese infantry supported by the fast-moving cavalry of their Mongol converts. However, the cities held firm, with their Indian backing. Some fell, including the ancient trade center of Samarkand, and the Raja of Delhi was forced to take the field officially by 1560. Still, the Wanyou were operating at the end of their very long supply lines, shipping troops and supplies across almost 2,000 miles of wilderness. The Wanyou expansion to the west effectively ended in 1570, with the reconquest of Samarkand. The treaty that resulted, though it was written in language that glorified the Wanyou's beneficence and tolerance, was essentially a promise that China would give up all attempts to forcibly conquer or convert Central Asia.

The year 1595, when Japan formally surrendered, marked the height of the Wanyou Dynasty. Its armies were stretched to their furthest possible extent, and China was now larger than it had ever been before. The emperors of the dynasty never formally renounced the goal of converting the world to their variant of Buddhism, but they began putting less *effort* into it. In any case, the religious fervor that had characterized the early rulers of the dynasty had begun to fade. Emperors and nobles lived in the height of luxury, and few had even seen a peasant, let alone learned the personal problems of one. As time went on, the promised end of the world, where all would be made equal and material things would be useless, began to seem less attractive to the upper classes. Despite the declining interest in dogma, the Wanyou's administrators were still chosen primarily on religious grounds, rather than for secular attributes such as good management skills. The empire's bureaucracy began to suffer as a result, particularly after the conquests ceased and the flow of new loot no longer patched the cracks.

UNDER AFRICAN SKIES

While the Wanyou Dynasty was trying to conquer Asia, India was making its own inroads westward. The Indians, particularly the merchant cities of the Deccan Confederacy, had been steadily establishing colonies all along the coast of East Africa since the 1450s. At first, the settlements had been simple camps, often designed to facilitate the slave trade. The Indian colonies expanded naturally over time, however, as they became more integrated into the local culture. The pace of colonization took a rapid jump in 1525, when the diamond fields of South Africa were discovered. Indians realized that there was more wealth in Africa than they had previously realized, and they began to pour in.

By 1575, the entire East African coast was firmly under the control of the Deccan Confederacy. The largest centers of Indian activity were in South Africa, where the mineral wealth of the continent was being exploited, and on the coast immediately west of India, in Homeline's Kenya and Somalia.

Buddhist Voudoun?

Buddhism has always been a faith prone to syncretism. The central tenets of Buddhist philosophy are fundamentally about *humans*, rather than gods, and they tend to be silent on the subjects of whether higher powers than humanity exist and what their role is if they do. As a result, Buddhism has found it easy to adapt local traditions into itself, co-opting their deities, either as gods per se or as other figures such as *bodhisattvas*. This tradition created the extensive pantheon of spirits, ascended humans, and other creatures that became Mahayana Buddhism in the east.

When Buddhism encountered West African faiths, a similar process took place. Many West African cultures already believed in an impersonal, distant divine figure, with many less-powerful, but more involved, spiritual beings interceding for humans. In Homeline history, this tradition gave rise to the Latin American religious tradition of Voudoun when combined with Catholicism. On Pele-2, the West African faiths syncretized with Buddhism, with results that are both strangely similar and very different.

African Buddhism is its own tradition on Pele-2, a fourth path comparable to Mahayana, Theravada, or Tantric Buddhism in Asia. Nirvana is seen as a distant state, attainable only by the most enlightened and dedicated seekers. To achieve Nirvana is to escape the suffering of the material world. But the average African Buddhist has little hope of approaching Nirvana; he must work to feed his family, protect his herds, serve his king or emperor. In any case, few wish to seclude themselves in a monastery. The African Buddhist, rather than concerning himself overmuch with enlightenment, prays to the Lwa – supernatural figures said to have power over various elements of human life – for aid in getting through his day. The Lwa started as spirits, but are now regarded as humans who have achieved “partial enlightenment,” gaining enough knowledge about the true nature of the world to gather power over it. The Lwa are seen as compassionate and willing to help humans if politely requested, usually including some offering to the local temple or monastery.

The northern settlements were originally waypoints and fortifications. Ships crossed the Indian Ocean, made landfall just south of the Horn of Africa, and then sailed down the coast. The fortifications served as a defense from the Arab traders whom the Indians had displaced as the premier commercial power in the Indian Ocean and who still controlled much of East Africa north of the Horn.

In 1590, the northern territories gained sudden prominence. A few merchants had listened to rumors that there were great kingdoms of gold far to the west, and launched expeditions to find out if this was true. That year, Banerjee Abhik returned from the west to the port city of New Mumbai with caravans *brimming* with gold dust, nuggets, and ornaments.

For PCs on Pele-2, consider modifying the Pulp Action! templates for GURPS Action from Pyramid #3/8: Cliffhangers.

If history repeats itself, and the unexpected always happens, how incapable must man be of learning from experience.

– George Bernard Shaw

He had travelled westward, holding to his course long enough to encounter the remains of the Songhay Empire (which had just been reduced to a fragment of its former self by the Sultan of Morocco). The spices, silk, and other exotic goods that Banerjee had in store proved highly popular, and he took his reward in gold, common in West Africa. This trade mission soon led to others, and a thriving route developed through Sub-Saharan Africa.

Settlement followed trade, and the Indian colonists were much better able to adapt to the African condition than Homeline's Europeans were. Malaria, the scourge of the tropics, was no stranger to them. Indian colonies survived and thrived where Europeans would have died in droves. As the Indians spread westward, they brought their troops, crops, and religion with them. Sub-Saharan Africa was a patchwork mixture of Islam and native tribal faiths, but the Indians introduced both Buddhism and Hinduism on a large scale. Buddhism, in particular, made many converts, with its willingness to embrace seekers of any ethnicity or culture.

NEW WORLD, OLD FIGHTS

The Americas represented the area in *Pele-2* where the greatest and fastest mixture of cultures and peoples occurred. The mixing was rarely smooth. In the hundred years after the discovery of the New World, war never entirely ceased on the continents. The first battles began almost immediately after the Chinese discovered the Americas, in 1480. The Chinese attacked the Aztec Empire in order to win local allies and improve their trading position. When the Spanish arrived from the east, the Aztecs had been defunct for almost 30 years, but the successor city-states still warred with one another. The arrival of the Europeans gave the native tribes a useful ally willing to provide aid against Chinese interference, and the Chinese proved only too willing to do the same to oppose the Europeans.

The first direct war between a European and Chinese force did not occur until 1560. The Spanish had been trying to gain control of the Mayan city-state of Tehuantepec in an attempt to get a solid foothold on the Pacific coast. The Mayans at first received subtle aid from the Chinese, in the form of mercenaries and materiel. However, when the Spanish refused to retreat in the face of a defeat or two, the Chinese colonies in the area grew fearful of a threat to their major port of Acapulco and took a direct hand. Chinese and Spanish forces clashed for over a decade in the jungles of southern Mexico before an uneasy stalemate emerged. Over the next 40 years, the Old

World powers would fight four more minor wars over various territories in Mexico and farther south.

Meanwhile, the various independent Native American states were doing all they could to narrow the technology gap. Although they were badly ravaged by disease and famine in the early part of the first century after contact, resistances eventually began to develop, and the various states had the advantage that neither major Old World power was willing to see the other conquer too many of the independents, which gave them some breathing room to develop. Particularly in the northern areas of Homeline Mexico, the city-states began to advance toward an Old World-level of technology. Metallurgy, mining, and a broader agricultural package all helped improve the Native Americans' ability to compete with the Spanish and Chinese. By 1600, most of the states of Central America could be reasonably compared to Old World civilizations in advancement.

To the north, meanwhile, technology diffused across North America. As in Homeline's history, domesticated horses were the first major change to be introduced. Horses spread through the plains tribes and eventually the tribes of the eastern woodlands over the course of a century. Firearms were the next technology to make their impact felt. Guns were traded north from the advanced city-states of Mexico, through the southwestern deserts, and into the plains. By the time the Europeans reached the Great Plains, they found a culture radically different from what had existed only 100 years before: a society that revolved around the gun and horse as the essential tool of the hunter and warrior. The archetypical image of the Native American on *Pele-2* is the brave with the rifle and steel knife, not the bow or stone tomahawk; these tools had already been abandoned by the time the Europeans arrived in the central areas of the continent.

On the western coast of North America, the Chinese established several settlements, the largest of which was Wuwan, at the Homeline site of San Francisco. However, there was little Chinese settlement between the major centers. The Chinese found the arid coastline inhospitable except at the mouths of rivers, where there was enough water for agriculture, and the mountains beyond the coastal strip formed a formidable barrier that the settlers didn't see the need to cross. North of Wuwan, some Hawaiian Chinese explorers did begin to build trade networks with the tribes of the Pacific Northwest, but it was clear that the natives lacked the mineral resources that made Central America so tempting, and little effort was made to subjugate them. Meanwhile, the Pacific Northwest tribes began to acquire whatever Chinese technology they could, trading anything the merchants wanted for the incredibly useful new tools.

*For a good selection of unusual guns that can be used on *Pele-2*, check out the two **GURPS High-Tech: Pulp Guns** volumes. (Change the names and histories of any weapons, of course . . .)*

The settlement of the eastern coast progressed similarly to Homeline's history. Both England and France made a few abortive attempts to found colonies, but none of them were particularly successful before 1600.

In South America, the Chinese of Lu Daoyu were almost unopposed on the western coast. They arrived in Peru in 1510 and found the Incan Empire already in shambles. Disease from the north had shattered the Incan administration, and old ethnic tensions had flared into civil war. The Chinese were essentially mopping up; by 1560, they controlled the majority of the coastal strip from Quito to the location of Homeline Santiago. The surviving Incan forces had retreated into mountain fastnesses and across the Andes, but the Chinese saw little reason to dig them out. The sack of Incan cities such as Cuzco had netted them an enormous profit of gold and silver, and Yinshan ("Silver Mountain," Homeline's Potosi), proved to be one of the richest silver deposits anyone had ever heard of. To the east, the Spanish and Portuguese were making inroads into the coastline, setting up large plantation farms to grow sugar and other crops.

A NEW POWER IN THE WORLD

By 1600, the presence of the three great colonial powers was well established throughout the world. Though not every spot of land was mapped and claimed, most people believed it was only a matter of time before Europe, India, or China claimed the last pieces. The three great civilizations had the men, gold, and guns – what more did they need to complete their conquest? The answer was in Australia, where a development was happening that would revolutionize the world's approach to both war and peace.

Australia, called Kuangdi on Pele-2, was a colony established by Lu Daoyu oligarchy in an attempt to create a base for a southern route to the Americas. The colony had grown only slowly during the first two decades after its establishment in 1540, but then an intrepid explorer into the interior discovered a hint of the vast mineral wealth of the smallest continent. The colony of Kuangdi grew rapidly, with a strong mining focus. By 1600, the southeast corner of Australia was packed with settlers, some hoping to strike it rich in the interior, and the rest there to support the miners. The population had swelled to almost a million.

In 1605, a Chinese mining engineer began tinkering with what would become a world-changing device. He was seeking a more efficient way to pump water out of his mine than bucket chains or simple windmill-powered pumps. Legend has it that he was making tea and absent-mindedly covered the pot with a cup. When the cup was flung across the room,

Where Are the Railroads?

One significant Homeline technology that Pele-2 never really developed was the railroad. Students of technological development are often puzzled by this seeming omission, but in retrospect, it makes a great deal of sense. Pele-2 developed steam power at a point when the cultures using it had not yet developed the full set of administrative tools that Homeline had in the 18th and 19th centuries, its great era of railway building. Colonies were not administered with the same degree of organization as on Homeline, and it was more difficult to plan large-scale projects or defend large-scale infrastructure. Also, several metallurgical developments that allowed easier construction of railways had yet to be discovered.

As a result, steam power was first applied to vehicles capable of travelling on regular roads or across country, rather than requiring expensive and impractical railway systems to be constructed. The standard steam-powered vehicle on Pele-2 is the giant self-propelled wagon, belching smoke as it trundles across the open grassland of Africa, following a rough track carved by those who have gone before. By the time the developments required for railways had occurred on Pele-2, the infrastructure for automobiles had already been established and was impractical to replace. Potential railway buffs on Pele-2 are doomed to forever miss their calling.

he realized that steam could provide the power he needed. Whether this anecdote is true or not, what is undeniable is that simple steam engines were developed in Australia at the turn of the 17th century. Steam power quickly moved from pumping mines to all manner of other applications: providing power for tools, working industrial processes, hauling great weights, and so on.

This new technology swiftly spread across the world. The Chinese took it to the New World and Asia. From the mines and colonies of the Andes, the technology moved north and entered Central America, where it proved enormously useful in pumping water into the large irrigation projects that fed much of the native city-states. By 1630, steam power had made the jump to Europe, where it began altering the face of industry forever. Steam likewise reached India by the 1620s and India's African colonies by 1635.

Pele-2's greater interaction between cultures and societies drove the development of technology considerably faster than on Homeline, even without the earlier introduction of the technology itself. In particular, steam power was applied to transportation much quicker. By 1650, a European inventor had thought to reverse the principle of a steam-powered water screw, producing a sailing ship capable of pushing itself without the need for a convenient wind. Likewise, the steam-powered ground vehicle was introduced earlier. By 1670, the Indians had miniaturized steam engines sufficiently that a wagon could be self-propelled. The Indians immediately began using their new technology to link their African territories closer together, building massive stretches of road across Sub-Saharan Africa linking east to west.

See GURPS Warehouse 23 for some interesting possibilities for artifacts that might be found on Pele-2. (Getting them to work is another matter . . .)

THE FALL OF A GIANT

The Wanyou Empire in China had been on the decline since 1600, when its expansion had effectively stopped. The empire continued on, but the endemic problems with the religious administrators only became more severe. The dynasty's civil servants saw little purpose in innovating or otherwise trying to improve the efficiency of their districts when their performance was judged on how well they could quote White Lotus scripture and propaganda. The state of the infrastructure of a province was less important than how fervent its peasants were in ceremonies. Shortages became common, and sometimes turned into famines. Away from the cities, bandits gathered, and some became warlords.

Historians would later mark 1703 as the beginning of the end for the Wanyou. In that year, Japan revolted. The Japanese islands had proved virtually impossible for the empire to assimilate. The populace remained stubbornly affixed to their original versions of Buddhism and their local animistic practices of Shinto. The interior of the islands had stayed a haven for rebels and bandits. As a result, Japan had become a punishment posting for officers and soldiers deemed incompetent, too outspoken, or simply insufficiently pious. That would prove to be a mistake. In 1703, a warlord from the still-unconquered mountains, Matsudaira Ienobu, began a full-scale revolt after uniting the mountain clans into a cohesive whole. Within a year, he had liberated the old capital of Kyoto. Ienobu was a charismatic leader, and he offered the Chinese soldiers still in the country excellent terms: Work for him, be treated as the equals of Ienobu's own Japanese troops, and have a share in Ienobu's ultimate goal – the conquest of China itself. Almost 50% of the Chinese troops in Japan, dissatisfied with the Wanyou, joined his cause. Ienobu then arranged to be adopted by the descendant of the last Japanese emperor, thus gaining extra legitimacy, and set about conquering the rest of his home country.

"Japan was a ripe peach, ready to fall," in the words of one of the epic poets who chronicled Ienobu's march. Within seven years, the whole Japanese archipelago was in the hands of Ienobu's army, and he did not wait long before stepping further. In 1711, the invasion of China by way of the Korean peninsula began. Though the advance was not as fast as in Japan proper, the Wanyou put up little resistance. The army was out of practice; the Chinese generals rapidly discovered that they could rely on their officers to compose an excellent hymn to the coming age of enlightenment, but not to lead an army. Many forces surrendered or went over to Ienobu without a fight. The new warlord was able to win the peasants' favor quickly as well, with lures of improved farming methods and more equitable division of lands.

Ienobu delivered on at least some of these promises almost immediately. Japan had a strong culture of technical skill, and the Wanyou conquest had not stamped it out. The new advancements in steam power had been more eagerly taken up in the Japanese islands than in most of the mainland empire, and Ienobu's engineers rapidly implemented many improvements to China's antiquated agriculture and industry.

The year 1733 marked the official end of the Wanyou Dynasty, when the last Wanyou emperor supplicated himself before Matsudaira Ienobu and declared that the Mandate of Heaven was clearly with him. By that time, Ienobu was almost 70 years old. His forces had already conquered most of the northern half of the Chinese empire, and were fighting their way south. He was crowned emperor of the new Gaoyang ("Uplifted") Dynasty and reigned for a token two years before abdicating and passing the mantle of emperor to his son, Ietsugu, retiring to a Buddhist monastery in the old tradition of the Japanese emperors.

Though the empire was declared in 1733, it has not yet managed to reclaim the full territory of the Wanyou. The cities of southern China, particularly the great merchant ports of Shanghai and Kowloon, were never firmly controlled by the Wanyou Dynasty, much like Japan. They had much closer ties to the Song exile community that now ruled much of Southeast Asia. When the Japanese invasion began, the southern cities saw their chance and revolted, receiving aid and support from their contacts in Southeast Asia. For the descendants of the Song, this was the dream finally coming true – they would once again be able to take control of their former homeland. The armies stationed in the southern Chinese cities were primarily formed of local troops, who needed little convincing to throw their lot in with the independents. The few remaining Wanyou loyalists were slaughtered or fled northward in panic, adding to the confusion of the invasion. By the time the Japanese forces took the capital of the Wanyou, the southern cities had been independent for over 20 years, and had no intention of giving up that independence to new overlords. For over two decades, now, the frontier along the Yangtze River between the south and the north has seen constant skirmishing and several outright wars. The Gaoyang emperors are unwilling to relinquish their claim on the rich cities of the south, and the southern cities are equally uninterested in joining an empire that only seems interested in the taxes it can charge on their merchants.

*We must go beyond
textbooks, go out into the
bypaths and untrodden
depths of the wilderness and
travel and explore and tell the
world the glories of our
journey.*

– John Hope Franklin

*In addition, just about any of the advanced gear from GURPS Ultra-Tech could potentially be utilized as alien artifacts.
"A sufficiently advanced technology . . ."*

Other Peles

Infinity knows of three other worlds where increased volcanism in the Pacific has resulted in a larger Hawaii. The discovery of Pele-2, in fact, was something of a surprise to the Patrol, because of its unique relationship to Pele-1.

There seems to be some strange connection between Pele-1, -2, and -3. The three parallels are not merely alternates that happen to share a point of divergence. The histories of the three Pele timelines seem to correspond *perfectly* to one another, up until their respective current dates; Pele-1's history is identical to Pele-2's up to 1550, and Pele-2 shares Pele-3's history until 1750. Homeline parachronic physicists aren't sure what's going on here – are the three timelines somehow echoes of each other, rather than the more familiar echoes of Homeline? What do the ruins, found on all three timelines in identical locations, have to do with it?

Pele-1 (Q6, current year 1550) is right in the middle of its first great age of exploration, with India, Europe, and

China coming into serious conflict in the various new frontiers they are exploring (for more details on Pele-1, see *An Age of Sails* in *Pyramid* #3/16).

Pele-3 (Q6, current year 2000) is enjoying the benefits of the high technology that Pele-2 is just discovering. Secrets found in the ruins have led to the development of advanced space travel at TL9, with superscience reactionless drives and force screens that are allowing the political powers of the day to explore the reaches of the solar system, where they are learning more about the builders of the ruins.

Pele-4 (Q4, current year approximately 200,000 B.C.) does not seem to be in the same collection of parallels that the first three Pele timelines occupy. However, the volcanoes of Hawaii have just finished their major eruption cycle, and the time is right for the builders of the ruins to arrive, if they are going to. Patrolmen stationed on Pele-4 are on edge, waiting for an invasion that may yet be coming.

INTO THE DARKNESS

The widespread interaction of Pele-2 has certainly increased both technology and culture. The industrial revolution continues to advance at a breakneck pace. The internal combustion engine, the next stage of power after the steam engine, was developed in the northern Mexican city-state of Huachicil (Homeline Coahuila) in 1709. Within the next 40 years, it spread across the world even faster than the steam engine. Pele-2 is now undergoing the revolution in personal transport that the automobile brought to Homeline – two centuries early. The automobile is not the only transport now taking off . . . literally! In 1740, Daniel Bernoulli became the first human to fly a powered heavier-than-air craft, making his historic flight on the shores of Lake Geneva in Switzerland. With that milestone reached, aviation has advanced rapidly, and now intrepid adventurers and military minds are closely examining the potential of the new aircraft.

Culturally, Pele-2 is more cosmopolitan than the equivalent period on Homeline. Europe never had an era of unquestioned dominance of international affairs, so it has been forced to acknowledge other societies as at least its equals in fields as diverse as economics, politics, art, and science. Likewise, India and China have been interacting with other social conventions on a regular basis, and neither has had the opportunity to retreat into an isolationist shell. In particular, China has now had almost five centuries in which there were many groups who were ethnically and culturally Chinese but not under the authority of the empire of mainland China and indeed actively refusing that authority. The equation of "China-as-Empire equals China-as-Culture" has been irrevocably shattered. All over the world, cultures are actively aware that others have useful insights to offer on their own problems. Christian theologians in Europe

study Buddhist and Hindu scriptures; inventors in the Old World look to the New for innovations and vice versa; artists all over the globe have begun experimenting with hybrid and fusion styles that introduce new sensations to the great cultures.

In the midst of all this intellectual ferment, a strong sense has arose that it is time that the remaining empty spaces on the map of the world should be filled in. Several of these that still exist. India and Europe have so far mostly ignored the great jungles of Central Africa. The vast rainforests of South America and the Great Plains of North America remain untrod by people from the Old World. There are many mountain ranges, deserts, glaciers, and other wastelands still uncharted by the cartographer's pen. In the past quarter of a century, a positive mania for exploration has come to the fore. The great powers compete for national prestige by exploring the unknown regions of the globe. In the last five years, however, new information has come to light that has thrown the drive to discover into even higher gear.

In 1745, an Indian explorer, Dubashi Ajaya, stumbling through the vast jungle of the Congo River, came across a mysterious ruin in the Virunga Mountains. The buildings were constructed of a strange material that appeared similar to basalt but was far stronger. The ruins seemed to be long abandoned, but the buildings were still in reasonably good condition. Dubashi reported his findings when he returned to civilization, but there was little interest and much disbelief – until a similar set of ruins was reported to be in the depths of the Amazon rainforest, a continent and an ocean away. In the last five years, over 30 sites, all showing very similar architecture and style, have been discovered in the empty places of the world: within the jungles of Africa and South America, high on peaks in Tibet and the Rocky Mountains, or half-buried in glaciers in Greenland and Antarctica. The ruins would be a

When adapting items from other sources to use as artifacts, it can be good to obfuscate their purpose, so players can't use their personal knowledge as easily.

fascinating curiosity simply for implying the existence of a single culture spread over so much of the world, but they have far more significance than just archeological interest. Within several of the ruins, strange devices of unknown principles and manufacture have been found, apparently of the same resilience as the buildings themselves. From what little scientists have been able to determine of their workings, the devices promise wonders the like of which the world has never seen. Now, everyone is rushing to find every relic they can, in the hope of being the first country to exploit this new technological windfall for itself.

OUTWORLD OPERATIONS

Homeline scientists are intensely interested in the phenomena of the ruins, including the technology they can provide. Unlike Pele-1, where the ruins remain undiscovered and any Homeline expeditions to them must be cloaked in secrecy, the ruins on Pele-2 are known and being actively sought out; Infinity can simply organize another expedition as a cover! The Patrol finds it easy to insert agents into groups traveling to known ruin sites, or looking to find new ones. (Infinity has a particular advantage with the latter, since they can examine an expedition's proposed route and only bother with the ones likely to find a ruin whose location they know about from Pele-3.) Patrolmen stationed on Pele-2 are almost certainly going to deal with archeological sites at some point, even if their official duties don't directly involve them; with the vast majority of Homeline interest focused on the sites, all other operations take a back seat.

Nevertheless, not everyone comes to Pele-2 to visit ancient structures. A reasonable amount of crosstime tourism occurs as well. Many Homeliners find the unique fusion cultures on this

timeline fascinating. Infinity agents are often tasked with keeping an eye on a party of tourists traveling across Africa by diesel-wagon or exploring the local color in a northern Mexican city-state. Tourists being tourists, someone inevitably gets into hot water with the local citizens or wildlife and needs a quick extraction. Patrolmen often treat this sort of mission as a welcome relief from the monotony of "ruins, ruins, ruins," something of a radical shift from their attitude on other worlds.

Centrum has a broader range of priorities on Pele-2 than Infinity does. While it is certainly interested in the ruins and their implications and technology, the Interworld Service also sees Pele-2 as a prime target to be brought into Centrum's hegemony. They consider both the Deccan Confederacy (with its African empire) and the Gaoyang Dynasty (with its aggressively pro-technology stance and ideological commitment to ethnic equality) as leading candidates for subversion and use as catspaws to conquer the rest of the timeline. Currently, the Service is torn between the two. The Deccan Confederacy's empire is larger than the Gaoyang's territory, and in the long run probably easier to uplift to Centrum's level of technology. However, Centrum is uncomfortable with the religious feeling that permeates the Deccan Confederacy. In contrast, the Gaoyang are, if not actively secular, then certainly much less ardently spiritual than their predecessors, the Wanyou. The Interworld Service is currently hedging its bets and doing their best to thoroughly infiltrate both societies. However, Centrum's parachronic calculations also suggest that Pele-2 may not be as amenable to manipulation as other timelines; it seems to have an unusually high degree of "historical inertia," and changes that diverge it from Pele-3 tend to be damped out. Centrum is still hoping to discover the cause of the effect, perhaps in the ruins somewhere, and work around it so as to integrate Pele-2 into its sphere of conquered timelines.

To travel hopefully is a better thing than to arrive, and the true success is to labor.

– Robert Louis Stevenson

DISCOVERING ADVENTURE

Pele-2 is suitable for adventure as a stand-alone campaign, or as a destination for adventure in the *GURPS Infinite Worlds* setting. Here are a couple of ideas for adventures set on this world.

SEEK AND YOU SHALL FIND

The most common adventure on Pele-2 is a quest into the unknown to explore of the mysterious ruins. They can be found all over the world, but are almost exclusively located in remote locations, far from human habitation: deep in jungles, high on mountains, lost in trackless deserts, or buried underneath ice.

Expeditions must be prepared to deal with dangers from the environment and hostile natives before they ever reach the region they want to search. Once there, the space must be meticulously scanned for any signs of ruins. Once found, they must usually be excavated to reveal the buildings, and any pieces of technology located and carefully prepared for transport back to civilization.

The biggest threat many exploring parties face is not from the terrain or even the locals – few people live near enough to the ruins to make much of an issue when explorers dig them up. Competition from other explorers is often the major difficulty.

Sure, the PCs might recognize the purpose of a gun-shaped item, but what about a tapered wand-like stick? Is it a weapon? A scanning device? An antenna?

All the major powers are desperately searching for the ruins, and often an unscrupulous organizer decides that it is simpler to equip a party with guns, thugs, and instructions to trail a more scientific party, rather than set up a proper expedition. As a result, most parties make a point to go armed and ensure that at least some members of the group are capable of keeping their heads in a fight.

Not every expedition finds ruins. The vast majority of explorers never run across one. Such journeys are rarely a total loss, however. Experienced knowledge-seekers make sure to document the whole journey into the unknown and keep an eye out for other useful materials, such as more mundane archeological sites, useful plants or minerals, or strategic points that their sponsoring country's military can be made aware of. More than one explorer has made a fortune off a mine or rare medicinal herb discovered while never finding ruins.

Care and diligence bring luck.

– Thomas Fuller

WATER, WATER EVERYWHERE

Two possible locations deserve special mention, for the difficulty in searching them: the world's ice caps and its oceans. The

ice cap is the easier of the two to explore, though by no means simple. Several ruins have been discovered in both Greenland and Antarctica, and several nations are now considering more in-depth explorations of Earth's polar ice. The prestige of being the first to reach one of the actual poles would be a nice bonus. Expeditions into the ice caps demand more-than-typical planning and supply. Polar explorers require more protective gear and more food simply to keep warm, and getting appropriate scientific equipment to and from the ruin is difficult.

Even more of a challenge, however, is the idea of exploring beneath the ocean. Within the past year, new ruin sites have been discovered under the waves, near both Hawaii and the Bahamas. So far, a few primitive diving apparatuses have been used to explore the sites closer to the surface, but there is talk of funding the development of vessels designed to travel underwater, hopefully avoiding the perils of water pressure that prevent divers from exploring very deep or for very long. Such devices are mostly confined to the drawing board thus far; any expedition using them would have to deal with all the usual quirks of new, untested prototypes, compounded by the harsh environment of the ocean floor.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

This article marks Kelly Pedersen's seventh entry to the new *Pyramid* format, and he's very pleased to be able to keep giving a little back to the hobby he's enjoyed. This article also allows him to indulge a love of asking "what if?", and he'd like to thank Kenneth Hite for really introducing him to the concept in a gaming context. Kelly lives in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, in the wilds of Canada.

What's With These Ruins, Anyway?

The ruins of Pele-2 (and on the other Peles) share certain traits, no matter how far removed they are from each other, either in space or across the timelines. First, the ruins are *old*. Although the science of accurate dating is in its infancy on Pele-2, this is still obvious. Simple stratigraphy suggests that all the sites are older by far than any other human construction. Homeline scientists, with better instruments and methods, know that the ruins all date to between 200,000 to 150,000 years ago.

Second, the ruins are *durable*. Though they appear to be made of simple basalt, the structures have at least three times as much DR and HP as basalt. The forms of the buildings are equally hard to disrupt. Even formations such as delicate arches and finely balanced supports are likely to have survived the march of centuries more-or-less intact.

Finally, the ruins are *alien*. Almost everyone who spends much time in a ruin agrees on this. The proportions of the buildings, the designs carved into walls, even the placement of the ruins with respect to the rest of the landscape, all seem slightly off. Doorways are typically much shorter than convenient for humans (only three to four feet high) while interior spaces seem cavernously large. Pele-2 has not yet deciphered the script that covers parts of the buildings, but it seems to have no common ground with any human

language at all. Even more oddly, there is a complete absence of any sort of images. The original inhabitants apparently felt no need to draw pictures of any kind.

Homeline and Centrum are aware of a fourth significant fact about the ruins: They have a strange effect on parachronics. It is virtually impossible to make a conveyor function either to depart from or arrive on any of the Pele timelines within 500 miles of a ruin (even psionic and magical world-jumpers have trouble). The ruins also tend to scramble parachronic sensors and other devices that rely on parachronic technology to function. Finally, both the Infinity Patrol and the Interworld Service have recently become aware of another anomaly that may be related to the parachronic issues. The ruins seem to be *particularly* strong in the "historical inertia" department. Any attempts to damage or destroy them, or otherwise change them from their current setup, are unlikely to succeed, in a manner that seems to defy statistics. In game terms, anyone participating in activities likely to alter the ruins acquires the Unluckiness disadvantage for the duration of the activity, and actions that may inflict serious, immediate harm to the ruins can cause the Cursed disadvantage. Adventurers attempting to have a rocket-launcher duel in the ruins will have their actions backfire – spectacularly!

THE BLACK BOX

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

At 5:35, EST, on January 11, Dr. Mary Mastronne (Ph.D. in archaeology, focus on Sumerian antiquities) was “collected” at her home by four U.S. Marshals. They told her she needed to come with them **now** and wouldn’t say why, except that it was a matter of national security. They told her husband, John, to expect no phone calls for at least 72 hours. Then they were gone.

At the 72nd hour, Mary called. She said she was fine, but that she was going to be away for a while. An “amazing opportunity” had come up, and she had to take it. She’d call if and when she could, but he’d just have to trust her.

Three months went by with no contact. John was frantic, but when he tried calling his representatives, he received a curt visit from an imposing man who reminded him this was a matter of national security.

“Just stop making waves, John,” he said. “Mary’s safe, doing what she does best. You should be happy for her.”

A month later, Mary was home. She was physically and mentally exhausted, but extremely happy. She was also \$100,000 dollars richer, having spent the last four months working to verify the dates and provenance of certain Sumerian artifacts that Interpol had intercepted from dangerous, well-connected smugglers – hence the secrecy.

Mary said she couldn’t talk about the details. She couldn’t even remember everything. But it **had** been important work, and she’d been happy to do it.

Every once in a while, though, when she was staring off into space, John couldn’t help but notice a strange look on her face. It was as if she were trying to remember something terribly important, some horrible memory she was trying to wrap her mind around, and allow out of her mouth, but never quite made it.

Most people consider modern scientific exploration is a mostly safe endeavor. People often think that centuries of learning from others’ mistakes have paved the roads to further study, and given several worst-case scenarios to prepare for. When preparation fails, the wonders of modern medicine and emergency services can save explorers who venture a little too far. People only die in freak accidents or from extreme bad luck.

This view is dangerously incorrect.

In the 21st century, exploration is more dangerous than ever. New technologies have opened up brand new vistas for discovery, but the tools and techniques needed to properly adventure within them are not always ready. There are some secrets that should stay buried, some places humans are not yet ready to venture into.

Some discoveries are too dangerous to be allowed outside the dig.

When explorers uncover something highly dangerous, or scientists encounter a problem that they cannot solve, the Black Box may become involved. This highly secretive international body can draft scientists and experts from any field to work on a project: unscrambling directions to find the way, finding solutions to deadly problems, and exploiting found items that baffle their discoverers. When the problem is solved, the Black Box has ways to ensure the silence of their draftees and contain what’s been uncovered.

Presented here for the first time – and at great risk – is the mostly unknown history of the Black Box, along with how it works, the three teams that make it work, and some of the secrets that keep it running. Modern-day games that feature exploration of the unknown, or cutting-edge science, as central or supporting themes could use the Black Box as a safety net, a plot device, or possibly even an adversary, depending on what the heroes are doing.

A BOXED HISTORY

Simply put, the history of the Black Box is the secret history of the post-World War II world.

Before that time, science ran riot with little or no oversight. Expeditions that went too far off the map were usually swallowed up by the dark corners of the map, and dangerous discoveries that went awry could be contained by those too scared to understand them. Dead or insane explorers were a tragic fact of life, but they usually didn’t take too many victims along with them. For whatever reason – most likely greed or indifference – the powers that be decided that was just the way of things.

World War II changed all that.

Hitler’s demented archaeologists in the Ahnenerbe scoured the globe to find dangerous artifacts for his *Wehrmacht*, securing – but (fortunately for the Allies) not successfully *using* – the Spear of Destiny, among other things. The Soviets turned to many destructive forms of weird science to repulse the German army. And if a small group of competent people could produce something like Hiroshima, couldn’t anyone?

Worse, what if they made a mistake?

Those in the know realized that the stakes had been raised. A doomed expedition or remote lab could be written off, but now accidents might claim entire cities or turn the tides of an arms race. In addition, the Soviets now wanted the power of the Bomb, as well as access to Hitler’s dangerous secrets.

*Some of the early recruits to the Black Box may have encountered the Ahnenerbe in the race **Into the Temple of the Hungry Star**, an adventure outlined in **Pyramid #3/8: Horror & Spies**.*

Something had to be done to ensure that what Hitler unearthed – along with what any other explorer or scientist found and could not control – was quarantined, analyzed, and either properly exploited or locked away.

In late August of 1945, three of the four military governors of occupied Germany – most notably *not* the Soviets – met in secret to discuss a plan. They decided to create a joint American, British, and French body to confiscate anything that the Ahnenerbe was working on, and make secret forays into Soviet-held Germany to sneak such items away from the Russians. General Eisenhower provided a central warehousing facility in Frankfurt, Field Marshal Montgomery promised to find “the right chap” to coordinate efforts, and General Koenig offered numerous clandestine contacts through the French Resistance and provided the code name: *la Boîte Noire* – the Black Box.

The “right chap” was Colonel Chester H. Morrison, known to his men as “Cracker” for reasons best left unsaid. He’d made a quiet name for himself commanding the daring raid on Germany’s secret base in New Swabia in 1943, putting an end to German wartime exploitation of Antarctica. In spite of 95% casualties, he’d followed his “denial to the enemy” orders to the letter, and lived to tell. He was relatively young, well-respected, ruthlessly effective, and able to keep his mouth shut – things Montgomery thought they’d need.

Colonel Morrison was happy to serve, with one stipulation: If these things were dangerous enough to collect and bury forever, they were dangerous enough to keep away from the governments ordering him to do this. He demanded the right to, upon occasion, censor *all* information, even from his superiors, so long as he was forthcoming with where they went and how they got it.

It wasn’t the most tactful of demands, but his three superiors reluctantly agreed. They figured that if Morrison failed, the next person would be more open. Despite misgivings, Colonel Morrison did not disappoint.

COLD MANEUVERS

Within five years, Morrison and his handpicked group of men had cleaned up Western Germany and made numerous sorties into the Soviet-held parts of the country to extract or destroy questionable items. For increased security, the Black Box built an underground storage facility on the outskirts of Frankfurt, and all “extremely dangerous” items were placed within it. These artifacts were locked within booby-trapped vaults, all at the end of a long entrance that could be exploded and caved in with the turn of a key.

The occupation ended in early 1949, and West Germany was made the Black Box’s fourth partner. At that time, the group’s mission was folded into the greater struggle of the Cold War. The explosion of the Soviet’s first atomic weapon in August of that year galvanized the four member nations’ overseers, and they saw to it that their respective international intelligence agencies continued to funnel funds, personnel,

and information to Morrison and his growing band of “Crackers,” even if they weren’t always sure what he was doing with what they gave him.

In years to come, the Black Box expanded its operations to focus on the worldwide struggle against Communism, staying one step ahead of Soviet researchers and expeditions. They ransacked Asian temples and Central American tombs, burned lonely labs in South America, and ensured that weird and esoteric quests for higher knowledge ended with bullets and high explosives. They also pulled off a number of impressive raids *within* the Soviet Union itself, denying numerous artifacts, discoveries, and sources of information to the enemy.

Unfortunately, the highly secretive and increasingly dangerous nature of their work meant that less and less information could be shared with their backers. By the time the early 1980s rolled around, no one was really sure what the Black Box was actually up to. The U.S., ever-seeking ways to cut spending, told the CIA to slash its funding for the Black Box, and urged the other three members to increase theirs. Sadly, they wouldn’t, and it looked like the organization was in danger of being carved up four ways and reabsorbed into each country’s foreign intelligence service.

*Perfect valor is to do
unwitnessed what we
should be capable of
doing before all the
world.*

*– Duc de La
Rochefoucauld*

THE MYSTERY BOX

That’s when things became a little strange.

The various foreign agents whose job it was to monitor the group totally forgot that they’d even existed. Files on the group mysteriously vanished from the various agencies’ lockups and storerooms. Top-secret expense ledgers had all mention of them removed. The central facility in Frankfurt was replaced by a candy company (Schwarze Kasten, specializing in imported liquorices) that – according to both city records and its neighbors – had always been there. Finally, those up high who knew anything about the Black Box just forgot all about it.

As a way to make the Black Box a bit more friendly to a PC group, consider altering their parameters so that an abductee can request a few friends and associates (in other words, “the rest of the PCs”) be kidnapped as well. Alternatively, the Black Box might be smart enough to realize that an asset with ties to adventurous allies might be best “hired” as a package deal.

About a year after the wave of ignorance was complete, the United Nations and all non-Communist countries received a phone call from someone calling himself the Director of the Black Box. His offer was simple: In exchange for monetary compensation, the right to press-gang scientists from around the world, and a guarantee of keeping the name "Black Box" out of the media, he would be on call to aid the nations of the free world against Soviet adventurism, as well as any scientific problems or serious disaster control and prevention they might have. The price was the seemingly risible *one million* U.S. dollars per job, and he guaranteed a satisfactory conclusion.

At first, the Director was laughed at. But when Belgium developed a serious problem with their Doel 2 Nuclear Reactor, the Black Box assembled the right people in less than three hours and saved the reactor in the next ten. Then India lost one of its submarines and asked the Director to find a solution that kept it from going to war with its neighbor. The means by which the Black Box found the *Sindhughosh* is still not entirely understood, but the Indian Navy was able to raise her and happy to have her back with most hands alive.

After that, the Black Box was set, and even the United States got on board with their "press gang" program, so long as they were serious about helping contain the Soviets. They did, though it became clear early on that they were more about saving explorations, solving problems, and crisis aversion than actual confrontation. Then the Berlin Wall fell, and even former Soviet states were calling the Black Box.

The post-Cold War world has presented its own, unique challenges. The Black Box has worked hard to remain neutral in the so-called clash of civilizations. They have kept themselves open for business to any legitimate, U.N.-recognized government, regardless of where they stand in terms of terrorism of any denomination. They have also refused to take any jobs that would better be served by the military.

That's not to say that the organization is *not* doing anything about certain persons, groups, places, and rogue governments on either side of the "clash." However, they are certainly *not* doing so at another government's request, or on their payroll. The Black Box has its own, quiet agenda and long-view timetable.

And they can well-afford to wait.

OPENING THE BOX

The Black Box maintains three ongoing missions, only one of which – Alpha (assemblage) – is known to the governments of the world. The other two are Omicron (observation) and Sigma (seizure), clandestine continuations of the organization's original mandate. Their exact functions are a secret, even from members of the Alpha mission. Only the Black Box's nameless, anonymous Director, and his imposing and

Working for the World

Life in the Black Box is not a whole lot of fun. Those who are employed in Frankfurt are completely sequestered within the facility; they live, eat, and sleep in their designated section, and do not get to leave unless they're out on an operation, which doesn't allow for a lot of sightseeing. The pay is great, but the hours are long, and the only way to really quit is to retire, which necessitates having memories wiped out.

One might think it'd be hard to find candidates for such a job, and they'd be right. Locating suitable members falls to the Omicron Mission, as they have the ability to look for possible recruits while they're doing their normal surveillance. They seek out otherwise-unattached people who specialize in esoteric and advanced fields. They look specifically for those who feel they need to pay something back to the world, prove themselves to themselves, or desire to martyr themselves in a nonlethal manner. Such qualities provide an ideal candidate.

After getting the Director's approval, Omicron agents pay the candidate a visit to see if they'd like to interview for a "special position." They are taken to Frankfurt, shown the operation, and made to understand what they'll be doing and what it may entail. Those who don't pass the battery of psychological and social tests, flake out, or decide they can't do it have their memories wiped out and are sent back. Those who pass and seem upbeat about the prospect of anonymously saving the world are welcomed in.

Another source of recruitment comes from former abductees who either keep breaking down the memory drugs, or see the show and decide they want to stay. The former are given constant doses of "liquid leadership" and put to work on something until the pharmacologists can fix the memory drugs. The latter are given the same battery of tests and, if they pass, given jobs.

creepy Executive Assistant, know the whole scope and scale of the organization's activities.

The headquarters are located northwest of Frankfurt, bordering the Hoch-Taunus Nature Park. Its above-ground portion looks like a massive, black hangar, connected to a series of runways capable of handling several large aircraft at once. As far as anyone knows, it's the primary facility for Würfelfabrik, an aircraft manufacturer.

Inside the hangar is the Black Box's impressive fleet of aircraft, capable of getting their teams, equipment, and smaller air, sea, and land vehicles to any location on Earth. Saying that their technology is bleeding edge is a massive understatement, but the Black Box has carefully constructed their equipment to hide how advanced they are; this saves them having to wipe too many memories.

The large complex has no walls but is under constant surveillance. A high number of automatic defense systems are scattered throughout the well-landscaped area. Most are nonlethal in nature (stun mines, knockout-gas ejectors, tranquilizer dart emplacements), but some very nasty offensive weapons are there, too – the kind that kill without leaving a corpse.

*For fake headlines that might reveal the Black Box's involvement, check out **Superhero Newspaper** from **Pyramid #3/2: Looks Like a Job for . . . Superheroes.***

I Sneer at Your Superscience!

The level of technical sophistication to which the Black Box has access is very high, and may be well over the level of technology that the GM would like to have in a supposedly contemporary campaign, regardless of how outré the heroes' challenges are. If what they are capable of doing sounds too implausible, then it's possible to scale it back and still have the mission be ominous and sinister.

One recommendation is to remove the memory drugs. The group went underground quickly and quietly, and blackmailed its original four "owners" into letting them run their own show by threatening to use the advanced weaponry they'd captured. They then made those countries force their own people to "forget" about the Black Box, and

"disappear" those who wouldn't play ball. Abducted experts can have what they see "scripted" to a certain extent, and if they witness too much, they can be pressured to keep silent, "disappeared," or given the chance to work for the Black Box.

The other recommendation is to remove the Panopticon's total surveillance package (see p. 18). Instead, harvesting information is mostly done through moles and traditional spycraft, as well as slipping into databases and personal computers. The group can only get into spy satellites and other sensitive areas if they're let in, though they maintain a few back doors into less-sophisticated systems. It's still possible to send spies into dangerous scientists' labs or expeditions.

Below the hangar lies what was once the Black Box's secure lock-up. The first five sublevels are the domain of the Alpha division, and house its many labs, quarantine zones, conference rooms, offices, and living quarters, all encircling its large control center. The Alphas know that Omicron and Sigma lie below their level, but they don't know everything that they *do*, given that they're not allowed any further down. All they know is that some problems have to be kicked "down, and to the left."

Omicron has the next three sublevels below the control center, where a frighteningly comprehensive program of global observation takes place. The Director and his Executive Assistant have their true offices on one of those levels, which are accessible through private, highly secure elevators in their Alpha-level offices.

Past Omicron's space, down a long corridor lined with explosives, is where Sigma does its silent duty. Truly dangerous assets, objects, plans, and prototypes are quietly shuttled from the surface on down without either of the other missions knowing about it. Then, depending on their danger level, they could be experimented on, brought to prototype and tested, or locked away for good.

INSIDE THE BOX

What goes on inside the Black Box? It depends on which side you look at. On one side, they are the anonymous saviors of the world, several times over. On another, they are its seemingly callous manipulators, willing to do almost anything to secure what they consider to be too dangerous to be explored.

As their Director would say, "We're everyone's best friend, whether they like it or not."

Alpha (Assemblage)

The primary reason the Black Box is called into play is to quickly gather experts to deal with a scientific or logistical problem, or looming or existing disaster. In an average year,

the group answers between 10 and 20 calls requesting their aid in such matters. They never turn down a legitimate call, though some things may be put on a lower priority.

When a call comes in, someone from Alpha takes the information and reports it to the Director or Executive Assistant. Once the task is accepted, it's assigned a priority based on how potentially dangerous or life-threatening it is, and either placed in the queue or moved right to the top. The Alpha division has the resources to handle three major or nine minor projects at a time, and each project is usually budgeted up to 10 "volunteers" for up to four months.

Then the process of acquisition begins. The Omicron division keeps files on scientists worldwide, constantly updating them to reflect their new publications and discoveries, and ranking their expertise in various fields. When the group is asked to intervene in a particular matter, they comb through the files to find the best minds to deal with a particular problem. Ideally, they can handle it entirely in-house, but if they can't, then they coordinate the near-immediate collection of the persons they need, using each country's own law-enforcement agencies to carry it out.

Persons who are volunteered for such projects are told only that they aren't in any legal trouble, but need to accompany their collectors *immediately*. Those who will not come willingly will be forced. They will not be given time to pack, or allowed to bring any equipment, computers, cell phones, tools, or other personal effects. Family members are told only to expect communication within three days.

Once brought to the event site – either in Frankfurt, or at or near the problem in question – the abducted are united with the other members of their team, offered refreshments, and informed of where they are and what they've been called upon to do. They are promised equivalent of \$100,000 for their participation and promised their families will be well looked after if something goes wrong. Though it's clear they'll be dealing with highly secret information, questions about keeping secrets are tabled "until this matter is concluded."

Evil GM inversion: The heroes encounter someone claiming the Black Box abducted him. They didn't, but he knows too much!

Timetables are not given; they have a problem to solve, and the sooner they solve it, the sooner they can leave.

Even the most hard-headed academics with the most to lose from an extended absence seem more than willing to go along with the project. This is because their refreshments – and all drinks they imbibe from here on out – are laced with a drug that encourages cooperation with perceived authority figures. The Black Box pharmacologists jokingly call it “liquid leadership,” but since it wears off within 24 hours they have to make certain their new friends keep well-hydrated. They also continually monitor their behavior to see if they need to increase their dosage as time goes by.

Once the problem is solved, the group attends a party as a going-away present. The participants are dosed with a chemical cocktail that causes intense suggestibility, then whisked away to individual “reprogramming” sessions that are tailor-made for each subject. Each person is made to forget everything he’s seen and done and to only remember a cover story that the Black Box’s psychologists think will work best for him. Then they’re put on a plane for home and woken up en-route, where they’re gently quizzed by a specially trained case officer who knows the full details of the cover story and feeds snippets of the false memory to make certain the treatment took.

What happens to the project after that is theoretically up to the government who commissioned the Black Box’s involvement. However, the group reserves the right to color the truth of things, or even lie, if they feel that what’s been uncovered isn’t suitable for general knowledge, or that the government in question – or anyone – can be trusted with what’s been found. People they rescue, scientists they aid, and representatives of foreign governments can be dosed and reprogrammed, too.

In the past, Alpha has:

- Located and aided in the rescue of missing expeditions and experimental vehicles in highly-hazardous, “inaccessible,” or politically sensitive areas.
- Aided historical, archaeological, and anthropological expeditions and inquiries into potentially dangerous areas or subjects.
- Acted as “canaries” to see if something or someplace that’s been uncovered can be handled safely, and created protocols for doing so.
- Developed methods to get people into “inaccessible” locations, and created protocols for handling what’s found there.
- Studied dangerous or odd events, and assisted in quarantining and evacuating the area.
- Quarantined dangerous, exotic, or extraterrestrial objects, either *in situ* or at the Black Box’s warehouse.
- Helped handle potential – and actual – first contact situations with sub-, extra-, and ultra-terrestrial entities.

Those are the things that selected people outside the group *know* about, provided they weren’t dosed with some memory-altering drugs after the Black Box closed up shop on that particular assignment. The rest of what goes on in Frankfurt stays in Frankfurt.

The Pharmacopoeia

At times, it seems like the Black Box has a drug for just about everything. The Alpha Mission knows how to make drugs that attach themselves to short or long-term memories and remove them. They can manufacture “liquid leadership,” along with substances that cause people go temporarily or permanently insane. They also have pills that turn an agent’s body into a two-way radio, allowing everything they say and hear to be transmitted back to Frankfurt.

The information comes from a fascinating work that the Black Box “liberated” from Egypt back in the 1960s. In its current form, it’s a spiral-bound batch of photocopied pages that provide, in somewhat stilted English – and with an odd form of measurement – the means by which these and other more exotic drugs can be created.

The book’s actual title is not known, and the collection has simply been called “The Pharmacopoeia.” Rumor has it that the Sigma Mission has the entire book down in the vault, and only these relatively harmless pages have been allowed upstairs. Also rumored are drugs that completely retard or reverse aging, allow for full or partial shapeshifting, make the user invisible, and other amazing effects.

Omicron (Observation)

Originally spiraling out of the group’s need to keep tabs on what the Communists were up to and what they may have gotten hold of (or be heading for), Omicron has grown into an all-seeing eye that keeps tabs on the entire world. They not only compile and maintain the up-to-the-minute list of the world’s scientists to send up to Alpha, they also keep a direct watch on the researches and explorations of people they deem of interest.

They do almost all of it with computers – just not in the way you’d imagine.

One of the great secrets of the 20th century is that every computer monitor and television made past 1955 is actually watching and listening. The Omicron Mission is able to tune into this feed through a curious device they acquired – the Panopticon – and thus gain valuable information.

In the past, the Panopticon let them keep tabs on governments, ministries, and high-tech labs, as well as anyone with a television set. Today it lets them watch just about anyone from at least two vantage points, provided they have both a television *and* a personal computer they regularly use. When combined with their agency’s ability to tap into any mainframe, satellite network, CCTV web, GPS, and cellular phone, it gives them the power to at least track almost anyone in the world, almost anywhere they go.

Coupled with the total surveillance package is the other side of Omicron: total control of the variables. They see to it that governments and their spy agencies don’t connect the dots.

For those who might become a “guest” of the Black Box, the perk Standard Operating Procedure: On Alert (GURPS Power-Ups 2: Perks, p. 15) is very useful.

The Panopticon

Found in the raid on New Swabia in 1943 (see p. 14), the Panopticon is a greenish, ceramic hoop about a foot in diameter with indecipherable writing looping all the way around it to make a single, unending “sentence.” Its original function is as unknown as what the writing on it means.

Through a total accident, it was learned that, if certain components were built into them, it could be used to watch what was seen by any computer or television monitor, anywhere. The Black Box has fully exploited this technology, getting those components into every monitor and television made since 1955; this allows them to “tune into” homes and offices around the world and watch and hear what goes on.

Today, the Panopticon sits in the center of a large room bearing the same name. A hundred Omicron agents, known as Watchers, sit behind four screens apiece, either observing one person of interest or endlessly flipping through a bank of assigned targets. They watch their targets’ work and home lives constantly, recording every moment and waiting for something important, or actionable, to happen.

They make certain that the families and friends of abductees don’t ask too many questions. If they need to, Omicron agents intercept e-mails and phone calls and send field agents out to soothe fears; if that doesn’t work, those asking questions are dosed with something to make them more compliant. They also watch to make certain that former abductees’ memory drugs are working, taking steps to fix the problems if they aren’t.

A further task is to send their own people out into the field to pose as technicians, workers, and even other scientists in order to infiltrate projects and expeditions of interest. They have people working in most of the major engineering and research firms of the world, watching certain research efforts and programs – and certain scientists – to see if they’re getting too close to a dangerous breakthrough, or subverting resources into their own private research. Once they’ve confirmed that the project is close to going “off the map,” Omicron brings this to the Director’s attention, and he either instructs them to sabotage it or hands it over to Sigma to deal with.

If Sigma gets involved, Omicron agents know to get out as fast as they can.

Sigma (Seizure)

Sigma is the last line of defense when science goes amok. It was their forerunners who snuck over the Berlin Wall to deny important technology and scientists to the Soviets. They still do that, only their mission is no longer as ideologically charged.

Their operation, at the end of the explosives-lined corridor, is almost a mirror image of what Alpha and Omicron do, only without direct possession of the Panopticon. They assemble study teams, run laboratories, and test out new and retro-fitted technologies, same as Alpha. They also keep tabs on what’s going on in the world, both by looking over Omicron’s shoulder, and having their own bank of watchers.

The difference is that while the other two agencies rely on drugs and persuasion to handle their problems, Sigma gets to use more direct, and occasionally final, means. They create kill-teams to send into hostile or alien landscapes, perform snatch-and-grabs from the most secure installations known to humanity, rewrite the written and electronic histories of governments, replace dangerous or unknown objects with fakes so well-crafted that no one could ever know they weren’t real, and (if all else fails) burn the anomalies – and their researchers – down to the ground to ensure that Earth stays safe another day.

Many objects that are placed in their vault (see below) are things that Alpha couldn’t control or didn’t dare try. In the latter case, Sigma often deals with such matters in-house, as they have a number of very creative and effective specialist teams ready to go at a moment’s notice. If it’s something they aren’t equipped to handle, they can create their own team of “volunteers” right out from under Alpha division’s nose.

Under command from the Director, Sigma also *creates* incidents so that the Black Box must be called in. The malfunction at Belgium’s Doel 2 Reactor was entirely their doing, and every couple of years they manufacture another accident – preferably nonlethal – just to keep the world’s leaders aware of the Black Box’s importance.

Locked in the Vault

Some objects of note in the vault include:

- Items of power, such as the real Spear of Destiny and a genuinely mystical crystal skull.
- Nazi flying saucers reverse-engineered from the real thing, and strange objects the Germans were digging out of New Swabia before the raid.
- Several preserved species of mutants, evolutionary oddities, and dead aliens.
- Portals to other worlds and realities.
- Temporal oddities, such as reverse time capsules sent from the future, and three 1956 baseballs found in an Etruscan tomb.
- Many of Nikola Tesla’s scarier blueprints, and most of Wilhelm Reich’s work.
- Numerous books and artifacts regarding the cyclical rising and sinking of an island in the South Pacific, and the things asleep on it.
- The hyperdimensional object that fell in Tunguska in 1908, and the creatures that were either piloting it or imprisoned within it.

*This is the same Black Box referred to in the opening fiction for **The Immensity**, a sinister ship that helps villains for a steep price. See **Pyramid #3/11: Cinematic Locations** for full details.*

At times, they design accidents so that they can be sent in to deal with something that Omicron has uncovered. They also create their own accidents, in order to steal and secure something that they think belongs in the vault, or else may help with one of their side projects.

USING THE BOX

The Black Box could always be added as background to a preexisting campaign, where the PCs have to get rescued while out in the bush, get an expert opinion on a particularly perplexing problem, or need outside help getting toward their goal. However, there's a lot that can be done within the Black Box, itself, for a single adventure or full campaign involving modern-day explorations or scientific endeavors.

Academics, Assemble: The heroes are drafted by the Black Box to deal with one of their perplexing problems: An oceanographic research vessel, off the coast of Easter Island, has ceased contacting its base, and fly-bys show dead crew lying on the deck – what's happened? Each PC has skills and experiences that can help unravel this mystery, but can they work together to do it? Will they succeed?

Suppressed Recognition: The adventurers meet up by chance at a scientific convention and feel as though they know each other, or have worked together on something. As it turns out they have: The Black Box used them a couple years ago, and they've all had their memories wiped. The investigators will have a chance to piece together memories and clues, but sooner or later, Omicron notices that they're in contact. Will they be visited by handlers before they can remember what they did, and why? Or will the Black Box make them another, more permanent job offer?

Watching the Borders: The heroes work within the Omicron division, and have been assigned to spy on a rather large expedition to Nan Madol. A peculiar scientist is going to excavate the seabed a mile offshore from the archaeological site, claiming that he has evidence of a similar structure, now submerged. However, Omicron knows that he thinks it was built for aliens and hopes to find proof of extraterrestrial technology. At best, the spies will be watching a somewhat cracked man endure heartache and cognitive dissonance; at worst, they

Unanswered Questions

Not all the answers to the enigma of the Black Box are to be found here. Some things are left up to the GM to decide.

- Who is this mysterious Director? Is he Colonel Morrison? If not, what happened to the colonel, and why?
- How do they maintain their operations on a mere \$1 million per assignment? Do they have some other source of income? If so, what?
- Why does the Director allow Sigma to create incidents and take things for their own use? Is he that amoral, or does he just believe that the world will be safer this way?
- What is Sigma doing with all its warehoused finds?

may actually find something there, and have to figure out a way to lock it down.

Inside the Zone: Just because they all work on the same team doesn't mean everyone in the Black Box agrees on each other's methods. The PCs are all members of Alpha who have been taken aside by the Executive Assistant on at least one occasion and ordered to stop asking questions about what Sigma does. However, when a seemingly routine infiltration op on an Antarctic expedition results in everyone dying but the Sigma operatives who cleaned it up, they decide to act. How do they investigate when Omicron can see everything and any question they ask could be reported? What will they find at the end of the long corridor?

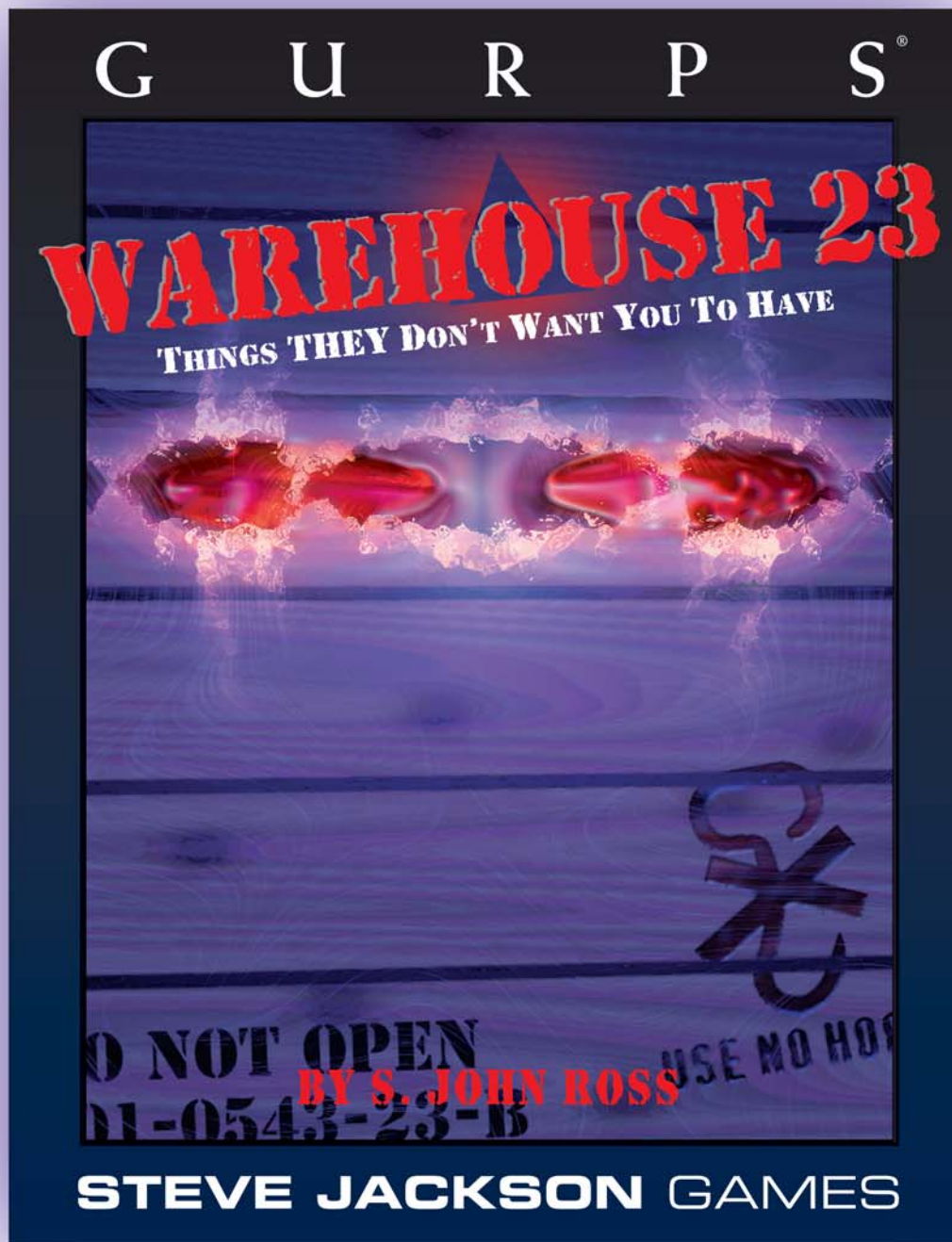
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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

There's always an Arquillian Battle Cruiser, or a Corillian Death Ray, or an intergalactic plague that is about to wipe out all life on this miserable little planet, and the only way these people can get on with their happy lives is that they Do . . . Not . . . Know about it!

– Kay, Men in Black (movie)

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CURIOUS COINS

If movies and television are any indicator, modern-day explorers are constantly running into situations where they need to solve ancient riddles, uncover a treasure in a sea of fakes, and find the One True Artifact to prevent some remnant Nazi cult from conquering the world. These curious coins can help the GM present a suitable clever obstacle for would-be heroes who find themselves in this situation.

THE SETUP

Print out this page and the following three pages, and cut out the individual coins. If desired, the GM may print them on colored cardstock or recreate them on fancier material (such as wooden disks). Then provide the coins to the heroes (and their players), either all at once or over the course of multiple adventures.

THE HOOK

The following pages contain 64 coins, each with unique markings. Presumably, only one of them is the One True Coin the heroes need to overcome an obstacle. It's up to them to determine which coin is correct, through clues created by the GM.

THE CLUES

Each of the 64 coins contains a number of markings that, in aggregate, make each coin unique. Heroes can narrow down the correct coin with six questions:

- 1) Is the desired coin square or round?
- 2) Does it have a border on the inside edge?
- 3) Does it have a hole?
- 4) Are there an even or odd number of lines on it?
- 5) Is there any text on it?
- 6) Does it contain a triangular alchemical symbol?

It's up to the GM to determine what those six answers are and how they are provided to the heroes.

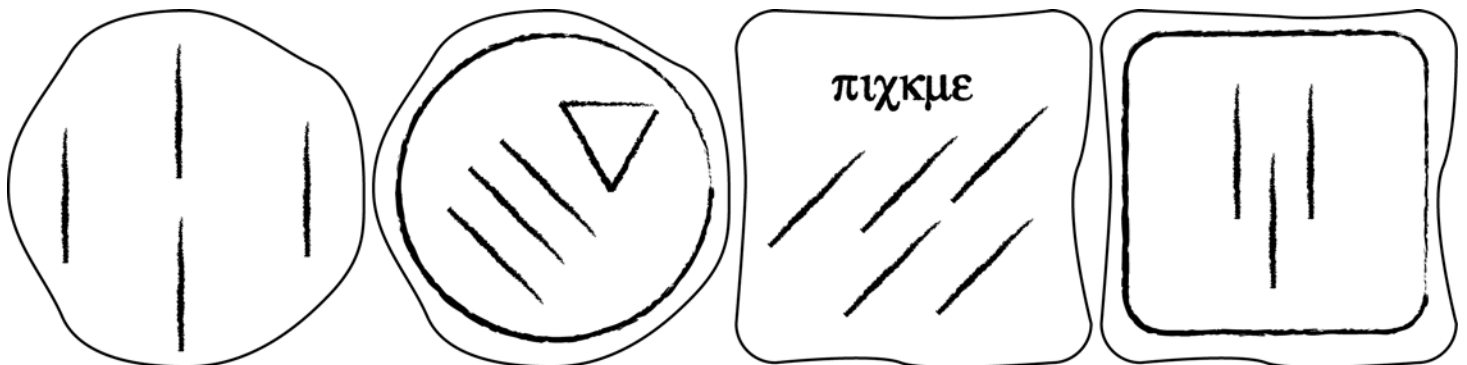
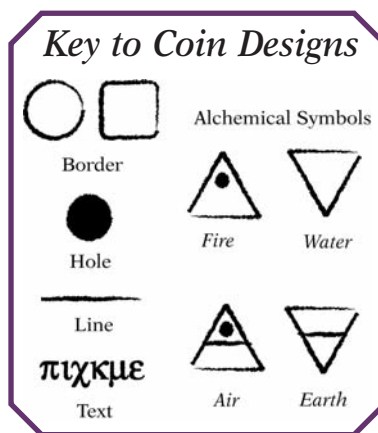
Example: The GM has decided that the coin in the lower-right corner of this page is the "true" coin. If the heroes figure out that the coin they're looking for is square, has a border, has an odd number of lines, and has neither a hole, text, nor alchemical symbol, they'll have all the information they need to narrow it down to that one coin.

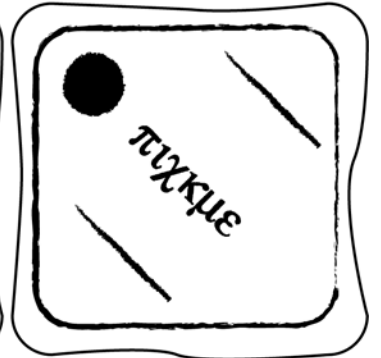
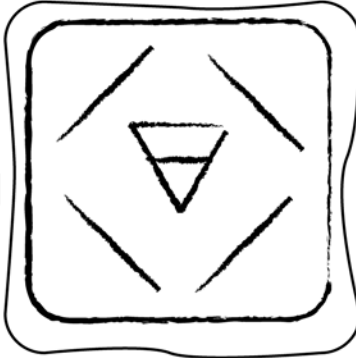
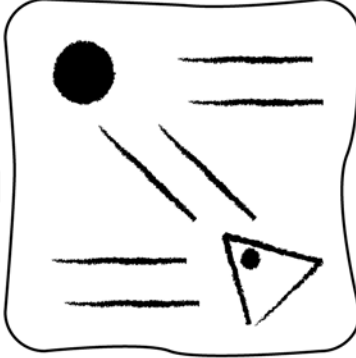
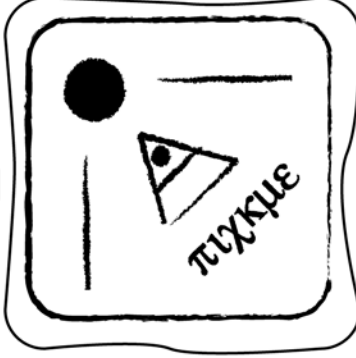
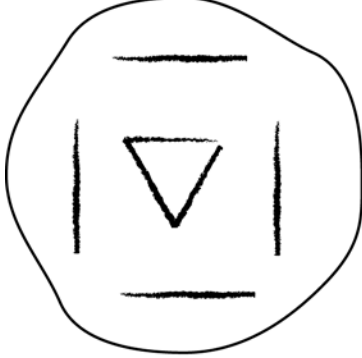
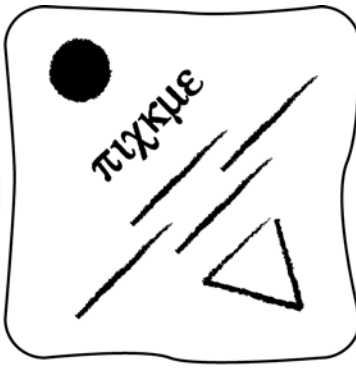
The answer to each question will narrow down the number of coins by half. If the GM wants a smaller number of coins, simply "pre-answer" one of the questions before providing the heroes with the coins they need to sort through. (For example, providing the heroes with only the round coins with borders only gives them 16 coins and four questions to answer.) In addition, leaving one or more questions unanswered can permit the GM to have a batch of correct coins; for example, the GM has decided that the heroes need to sort out four correct coins to balance an ancient scale; he thus omits two questions.

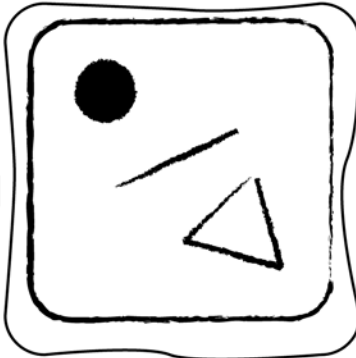
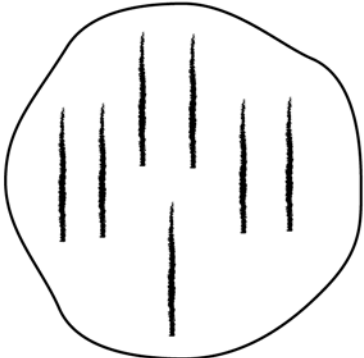
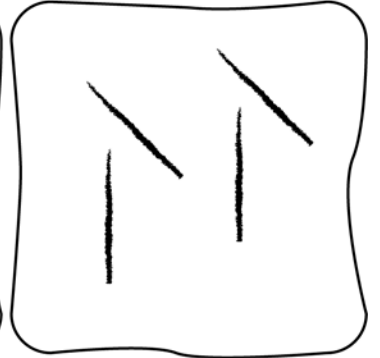
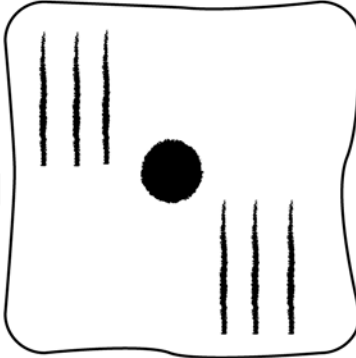
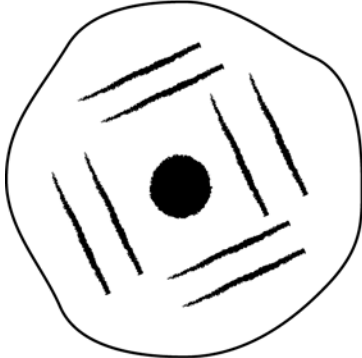
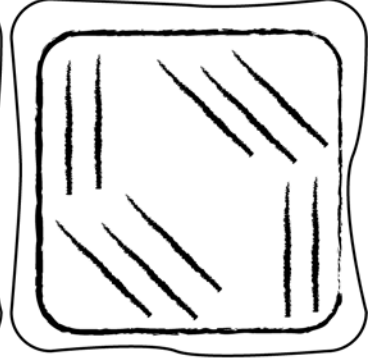
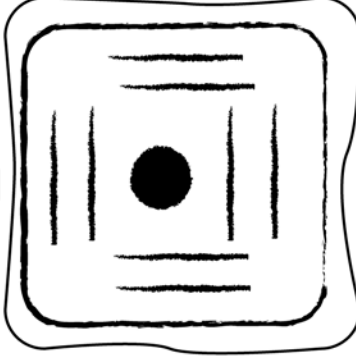
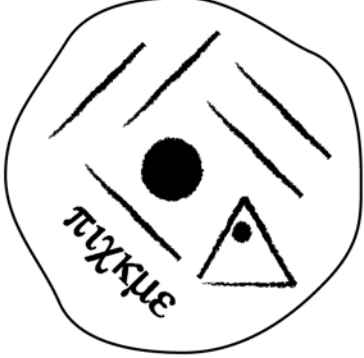
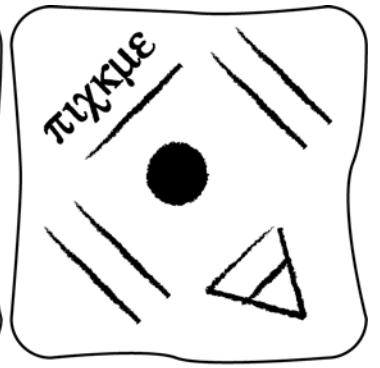
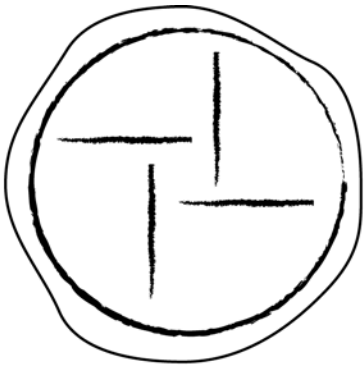
VARIANTS

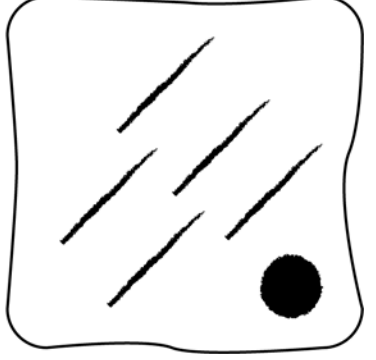
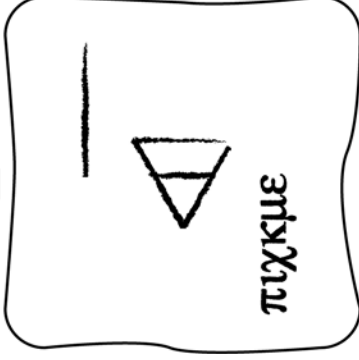
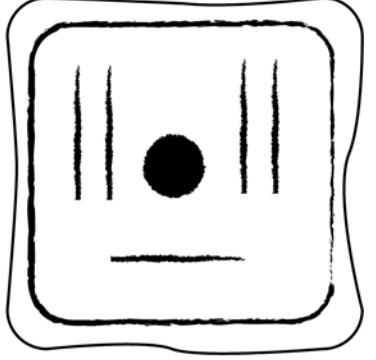
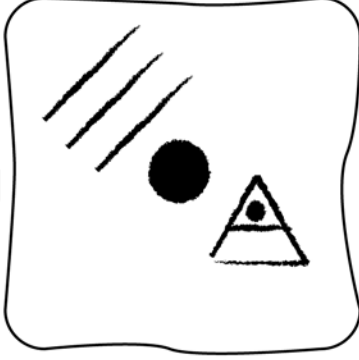
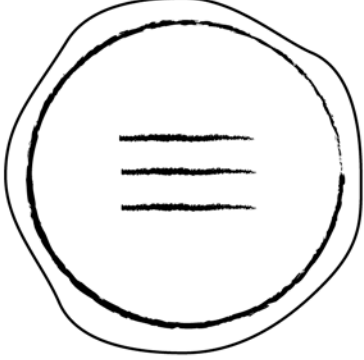
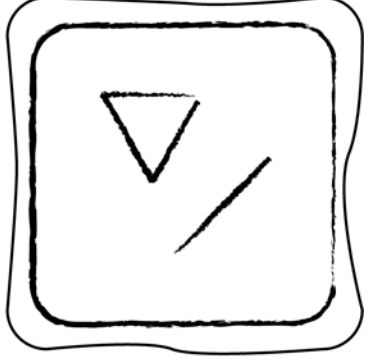
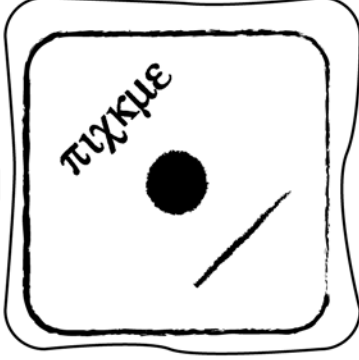
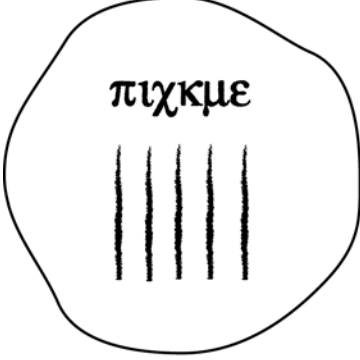
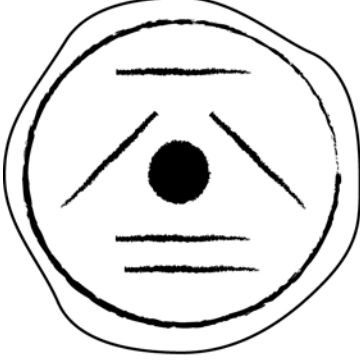
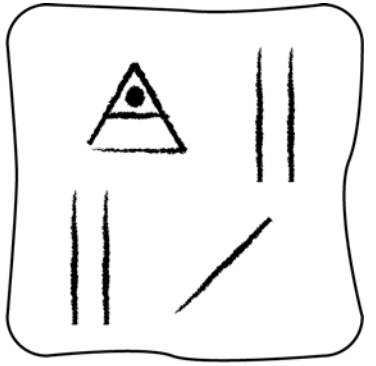
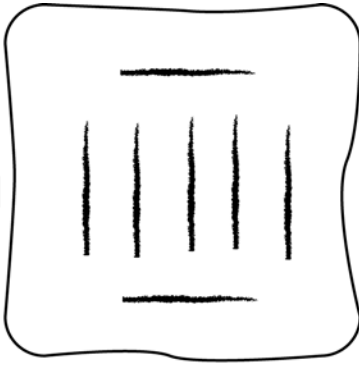
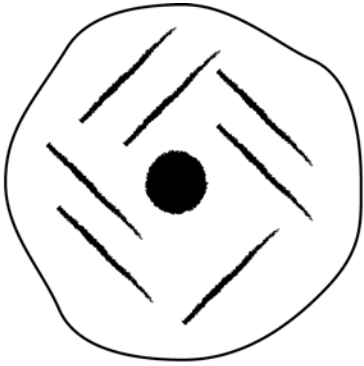
Here are some alternate ideas for using the curious coins.

- Mark the backs of each coin with a letter, word, or other scrap of information. Once the correct coin(s) are found, the adventurers use that knowledge to sort out another situation.
- The heroes need the number and pattern of lines – or the correct alchemical symbol – to resolve a ritual or trap.
- The GM can recreate the markings on these coins on other props. For example, they could be on a set of keys (of which one is the correct one).
- Change the text on each coin so that it resembles a passphrase or magic word. The adventurers need to figure out the right one(s).
- To keep the binary nature of the coins less obvious, simply remove a few (incorrect ones) from the batch before providing them to the heroes.









MUMMY AMULETS

BY GRAEME DAVIS

Belkins held up his battery lantern and began to translate the hieroglyphs.

"Beware, all who would disturb the sleep of the great queen Aset-em-ankh. Her protectors are many and cannot die. You are few and mortal. Your souls shall be torn from your shattered bodies; the first shall feed the dread Am-met, and the second shall feed the worms."

Finnegan grinned reassuringly down at the slender archaeologist.

"Mummies aren't a big deal. A shotgun blast to the head'll take 'em out just like any other walking corpse. Fire, too. They go up like the Fourth of July. The only time we'll have a problem is if there are too many of them."

Mummies don't get enough respect. Adventurers roaming the sands of Egypt or the museums of Europe will cut them down without a second thought on their way to the villain who animated them or the lich who commands them. This article offers the GM a way to redress the balance, and give players a healthy fear of the bandaged dead once more.

The ancient Egyptians buried their dead with a wide array of amulets, each intended to perform a specific function. Some of them also provided some protection to the living, but their primary function was always to help their mummified wearer make it through all the hazards – physical, magical, and theological – that lay along the path to resurrection in the afterlife.

GURPS Egypt gives interpretations of the heart, scarab, and *udjat* (eye of Horus) amulets, but it does not distinguish between living and mummified wearers. This article presents these and other amulets that can be used to turn a regular Egyptian mummy into a formidable foe.

MUMMY AMULETS AND WIDE-EYED ADVENTURERS

Many of the amulets in this article are very powerful items that will bring a glint of avarice to the eyes of any player and make any GM nervous about PCs becoming immortal and invulnerable. The ancient Egyptians must have had similar

thoughts, because they had two ways of preventing tomb-robbers from gaining godlike powers from them.

Funerary Amulets

Many cultures buried their dead with magical or religious objects intended to see the deceased safely into the afterlife. As well as protecting the body against physical or magical interference, these objects could have additional functions: bypassing divine judgment to ensure passage into the culture's heaven, providing health and strength, protecting the deceased against demons and other hostile spirits, and so on.

Funerary amulets work only on the dead (and undead). Worn by the living, they are usually nothing more than jewelry. Exceptionally rare and powerful pieces might kill a living person who puts them on, possibly transforming the resultant corpse into a zombie, but operate normally once the wearer is dead.

All the amulets described here are funerary. Some ancient Egyptian amulets – most notably the scarab – also came in a version for living wearers, with different effects. These are discussed briefly at the end of the article.

Not all funerary amulets are truly magical; those kinds are very powerful items, and only the very wealthy could afford them. Those who lacked the wealth and power to equip their dead with magical amulets provided nonmagical versions in the hope that they would have some beneficial effect. Some families may have included only one magical amulet with their dead, with mundane versions of others. Likewise, not every amulet was used in every burial.

Personalized Amulets

The ancient Egyptians believed that a person's name was just as much a part of his being as the body and the different types of soul. In inscriptions, the names of pharaohs and other dignitaries are surrounded by the *ren* cartouche, which protected the name from being used in hostile magic.

Following the same thinking, many magical amulets bore magical inscriptions that included the name of the person for whom they were made and stopped the amulet from working on anyone else.

*What if the heroes need to pick the one "true" amulet from amid a group? The GM might use **Curious Coins** (pp. 21-24) to point the adventurers in the right direction.*

Creating Mummy Amulets

The amulets in this article are intended to be encountered by Victorian or pulp adventurers and won as treasure rather than being manufactured by magical gadgeteers, and there are no instructions here for making them. The GM can either assume that their creation is an art that was lost with the passing of the pharaohs, or come up with requirements that fit the magic level of the campaign.

At the very least, someone trying to make one of these amulets must have a complete copy of the *Book of the Dead*. Although fragments of it are found in every ancient Egyptian tomb, compiling a whole copy requires exacting research over a number of years.

Even with the entire copy of that text, the person must have great expertise in reading and interpreting hieroglyphs, and the ability to speak ancient Egyptian fluently – the formulae for creating the amulets include incantations that must be spoken in their original tongue.

It also is necessary to become an anointed priest of the ancient Egyptian pantheon and to gain the favor of Isis, Osiris, and as many other ancient Egyptian gods as possible. Since any surviving ancient Egyptian cults are either wary after two millennia underground avoiding Christian persecution or romantic Victorian recreations of an imperfectly understood religion, this will not be easy.

Finally, the magician must assemble the spells and materials to create the amulets. These are up to the GM to decide, following the guidelines in *GURPS Magic*. All spells must be cast at level 20 or higher. The materials (including the carving of the amulets and any inscriptions on them) must be of the finest quality and workmanship, possibly requiring the person to acquire the necessary craft skills. Unknown ingredients, such as the mysterious *ankham* flower, must be identified and obtained. The materials costs of a working amulet are astronomical even by the standards of the pharaohs.

All in all, the task of recreating these amulets should be both challenging and time-consuming for any magician. Antagonistic Egyptian cultist priests – such as those who often feature in mummy movies – may have the necessary knowledge, but the average PC will not.

THE HEART (AB)

Made of lapis lazuli, carnelian, red jasper, or red faience, this amulet was placed inside the mummy in place of the actual heart, which was removed and stored in a canopic chest. Alternatively, it could be laid on the bosom inside the mummy's wrappings.

Lore

To the ancient Egyptians, the heart, and not the brain, was the seat of reason and personality. The heart amulet had many functions. Its most important was as a "Get Out of Jail Free" card (according to the *Book of the Dead*: "He has not been judged according to what he has done") that ensured the wearer passed the judgment of Osiris and could go on to Amenti, the place of the afterlife. It also gave the deceased power over his limbs and body, along with renewed life and health.

Game Effects

When worn by an animated mummy, the heart amulet resurrects its wearer, conferring a fully living appearance along with all mental attributes, skills, advantages, and disadvantages from life. Like Boris Karloff in the 1932 movie *The Mummy* or Ramses in Anne Rice's *The Mummy, or Ramses the Damned*, the mummy can pass as a living person and remembers everything from his life.

THE SCARAB (KHEPER)

The scarab was by far the most popular type of amulet in ancient Egypt, and has been found in tens of thousands of tombs. (Of course, it is hard to say with any certainty how many of these are mere trinkets and how many are truly enchanted.) The scarab was usually carved from blue or green stone for use in a burial. It was worn around the neck on a gold wire or necklace.

Lore

The ancient Egyptians venerated the scarab beetle as the god Kheper, who rolled the sun endlessly across the sky to create day and night. The scarab was connected to the life-giving power of the sun and protected the life force.

Game Effects

Placed on a mummified corpse, the scarab amulet animates it as if by the *Zombie* spell (*Magic*, p. 151), creating an animated mummy. If the amulet is removed or destroyed, the mummy instantly reverts to being a mummified corpse.

THE BUCKLE OF ISIS (TET)

The amulet of the buckle was made of a red stone (commonly carnelian or jasper), and sometimes contained gold. It was dipped in water in which *ankham* flowers had been steeped, then strung around the neck. The *ankham* flower has not been identified, but might have been the flower of the henna plant, the lotus, or the water lily.

Lore

Isis was the most powerful goddess in the ancient Egyptian pantheon, and the mistress of all kinds of magic. The *Book of the Dead* declares that "the blood of Isis, and the strength of Isis, and the words of power of Isis shall be mighty to . . . guard him from one who would do unto him anything that he holds in abomination."

In the 1901 book Egyptian Magic, Sir Ernest Alfred Wallis Budge notes: "Amulets are of two kinds: (1) those which are inscribed with magical formulae, and (2) those which are not." Even academics state the obvious!

Here is thy backbone, O god, whose heart is motionless; here is thy spine, O god, whose heart is motionless. I am come, and I bring to thee a Tat of gold; rejoice thou at it.

– Amulet inscription, from H.M. Tirard, *The Book of the Dead*

Game Effects

The amulet of the buckle grants Magic Resistance 10 (Improved, +150%) [50] (p. B67).

THE PILLAR OF OSIRIS (DJED)

This amulet was made of wood covered in gold. Like the amulet of the buckle (above), it was dipped in water where *ankham* flowers had been steeped, and strung around the wearer's neck.

Lore

The amulet represented the backbone of Osiris and symbolized his resurrection by Isis. The amulet gave the deceased the power to reconstitute the body and become a perfect *khu* (spirit) in the afterlife.

Game Effects

The amulet grants the mummy Regrowth (p. B80).

THE HEADREST (URS)

Also called the pillow, this amulet represents the wooden headrest used by the ancient Egyptians while sleeping. Similar headrests are still used in the more remote parts of Africa. The amulet was made of hematite and placed at the back of the wearer's neck.

Lore

The *Book of the Dead* contains the following lines about this amulet: "Rise up, thou sick one, lying dead. . . . Thou cuttest off the heads of thine enemies, and they shall never carry off thy skull."

Game Effects

The amulet of the headrest prevents any attack, mundane or magical, from decapitating the wearer. It also prevents other attacks on the neck from succeeding. Any attack that hits the neck automatically causes no damage.

In addition, the wearer's ability to decapitate enemies becomes magically enhanced. Any attack aimed at an enemy's

neck ignores the usual -5 penalty to hit and always causes maximum damage.

THE VULTURE (NERAUT)

This amulet was made of gold – sometimes set with precious stones – and hung around the neck of the wearer. It took the form of a spread-eagled vulture holding an *ankh* in each talon.

Lore

The amulet of the vulture invoked the protection of Isis in her role as the divine mother, just as she protected Horus when he battled Set to avenge the murder of his father Osiris. The *Book of the Dead* includes these words about the amulet: "He has made his deeds to be remembered; he has created fear and awe of him."

Game Effects

The vulture amulet confers the Terror advantage (p. B93) on its wearer.

THE PAPYRUS SCEPTER (UATCH)

The amulet of the papyrus scepter was made of mother-of-emerald, or light green or blue ceramic. It hung around the wearer's neck.

Lore

The papyrus scepter was placed on a mummy to instill the deceased with renewed strength and vigor, ensuring that the body was in the prime of life at the time of resurrection. The *Book of the Dead* says: "It is sound, and I am sound; it is not injured, and I am not injured; it is not worn away, and I am not worn away."

Game Effects

The papyrus scepter is imbued with always-on Halt Aging, Resist Disease, and Resist Poison spells, and grants the mummy Regeneration (Regular) (p. B80).

These amulets could all serve as great plot devices in GURPS Thaumatology: Age of Gold, where magical Egyptology meets pulp superheroics!

THE LIFE FORCE (ANKH)

The *ankh* amulet was made of many different materials, and worn by the living as well as the dead. It was most commonly worn as a pendant, but could also be incorporated into other kinds of jewelry.

Lore

The *ankh* symbolized the life force and, in some contexts, stood for immortality. Ancient Egyptian gods were commonly depicted carrying an *ankh* in one hand. The symbol was so powerful that in Christian times, Coptic Egyptians used it to represent the cross; it was known in Latin as the *crux ansata*, or *ankh*-shaped cross.

Game Effects

The magical *ankh* is an always-on item imbued with the spells Recover Energy and Resurrection.

THE EYE OF HORUS (UDJAT)

The eye of Horus could be made of faience, gold, silver, granite, hematite, carnelian, lapis lazuli, porcelain, or wood, among other materials. Lapis lazuli covered in gold was said to give the best effect. It could be worn as a pendant or worked into the design of another piece of jewelry.

Lore

The eye of Horus was a protective amulet, symbolizing the god literally looking down on the deceased.

Game Effects

The eye of Horus is an always-on item imbued with the spells Resist Disease, Resist Poison, Halt Aging, and Repel Spirits.

THE COW (AHAT)

The cow was a two-part amulet, consisting of a golden cow pendant placed on the neck of a mummy, and a papyrus disk marked with a cow placed at the back of the head. This could be within the mummy's wrappings. If separated, both amulets will appear to be magical but will have no effect.

Lore

The purpose of the cow amulet was to keep the "vital heat" in the body, preserving a spark of life that could be used to make resurrection easier. The cow was a symbol of healing in ancient Egypt, linked to the nurse-goddess Hathor and to Isis in her role as the divine mother of Horus.

Game Effects

The amulet of the cow is an always-on item that eliminates any penalties to a Resurrection roll arising from the length of time the wearer has been dead.

THE LUTE (NEFER)

This amulet was popular among the living as well as the dead. Made of carnelian, red stone, red ceramic, faience, or semi-precious stone, it was worn as a pendant. Multiple *nefer* amulets were sometimes strung together in a necklace.

Lore

The ancient Egyptian word *nefer* translates into English as joy, and also implies the beauty of youth. The amulet was worn to ensure happiness and good fortune.

Game Effects

Worn by a mummy, the *nefer* amulet grants Resistant (+8) against all hostile mind-control spells and all necromantic turning and controlling spells (pp. B80-81).

Many cultures buried their dead with magical or religious objects.

THE SOUL (BA)

The soul amulet took the form of a human-headed hawk made of gold inlaid with semi-precious stones. It was laid on the chest or worn as a pendant.

Lore

The *ba* was the part of the soul that contained the individual's personality and knowledge. The *ba* amulet allowed the *ba* to reunite with the body. The *Book of the Dead* reads: "Let my *ba* come to me from wherever it may be. . . let me not lie down as a dead being."

Game Effects

A mummy wearing the *ba* amulet regains all mental attributes, skills, advantages, and disadvantages from life. Unlike the amulet of the heart, the *ba* does not return its wearer to his living form.

THE SERPENT'S HEAD (ARART)

The amulet of the serpent's head was made of red faience or a red stone such as carnelian or jasper. It was placed at a mummy's neck inside its wrappings.

Lore

While ancient Egyptians revered the cobra, snakes in general were feared. The great serpent Apep was the enemy of the gods.

GURPS Places of Mystery contains information on the pyramids, where these amulets are likely might to be found.

He battled Ra every night while the sun was below the earth. Worn by both the living and the dead, the amulet of the serpent's head protected the wearer against the demonic minions of Apep, as well as more mundane snakes.

Game Effects

The amulet of the serpent's head is an always-on item imbued with the spells Repel Snakes and Repel Spirits.

Evil Variant

The mummy of a priest of Apep (or of a priest of Set in a Robert E. Howard-inspired campaign that has that god rather than Apep as the lord of serpents) is likely to have a different version of this amulet, imbued with summoning and controlling spells rather than repelling spells.

Recreating these amulets should be both challenging and time-consuming.

AMULETS AND THE LIVING

As already noted, the amulets described above are funerary amulets and give no benefits to a living wearer. However, non-funerary versions of some of them were worn by the living. These might be found in ancient Egyptian tombs or worn by NPCs who are proficient in Egyptian magical traditions, and these items are of more interest to adventurers.

The Scarab

The scarab is an always-on item imbued with the Recover Energy spell at level 20. See *Magic*, p. 89.

The Vulture

Only the pharaoh and his close family were permitted to wear the amulet of the vulture. It is an item that gives the

wearer the ability to use the spells Enslave, Control Zombie, and Command Spirit.

The Ankh

The magical *ankh* grants Resistant (+8) against all hostile body-control spells.

The Eye of Horus

The eye of Horus is an always-on item imbued with the spells Resist Disease, Halt Aging, and Repel Spirits, like its funerary counterpart.

The Lute

The *nefer* amulet confers on its wearer Resistant (+8) against all hostile mind-control spells.

The Serpent's Head

The amulet of the serpent's head is imbued with a permanent version of the spell Repel Snakes.

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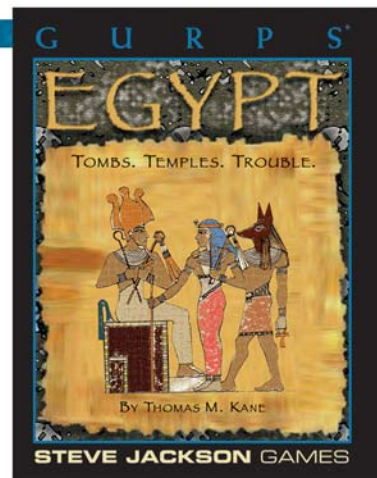
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Graeme Davis is the author of *GURPS Vikings*, *GURPS Middle Ages 1*, and *GURPS Faerie*. After spending far too much time playing roleplaying games at college in the early 1980s, he worked for Games Workshop developing *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, and has been freelance – with various jobs in the video games industry – ever since.

Oh mummy!

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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

SHOVEL BUMS

BY KEN SPENCER

What do you call a group of people without a permanent residence, bouncing around the country, living in cheap inns or just tents, dining at local eateries, exploring ancient ruins, and trying to make a profit? Most would call them adventurers, a staple of roleplaying, but one that is mostly mythical and certainly not a viable career choice in the 21st century. In truth, this description fits a whole class of professional archaeologists hard at work in the here and now. Collectively, they are known as itinerant archaeological field technicians – or more commonly, shovel bums.

A shovel bum is an archaeologist without a home; they are not tied to a university, government agency, or corporation. Instead of holding a regular nine-to-five job, they act as freelancers filling the need for trained and experienced archaeologists at sites across North America. Shovel bums live in whatever accommodations their current employers provide. When between work, they do what they can to get by (even cheaper hotels, tents, the couches of friends and relatives). It is a roving lifestyle, one that presents many opportunities for adventure and few chances for fame or glory (but that's not why most do it).

The lifestyle can also be a hard one that taxes people both physically and mentally. The work is outside; it's hot in the summer, cold in the winter, and wet in the rain. A shovel bum goes from back-breaking physical labor to intense detail work and on to complex mental gymnastics throughout the workday. Add to this the stress brought about by the nature of archaeological work – especially the realization that lost or destroyed cultural materials are gone forever. Dealing with human remains, especially those of indigenous persons, causes even more stress. After the workday (which is usually dawn to dusk) is over, it's back to a lonely and flea-bitten hotel room far from friends and family.

As bad as it can be, being a shovel bum is also adventurous in ways that few in the modern world can hope to experience. There is constant travel, new sites to explore, the chance to be part of an important find, and a freedom that can be its own reward. A shovel bum rarely has to pay rent or utilities, worry about mortgages or traffic-filled commutes, and lives outside of the mainstream but close enough to enjoy the perks of modern life. The bonds formed between people working the same site are as strong as they are transitory, and it's common to make fast friends in a matter of days.

Shovel bums, being itinerant in nature, can provide an ideal cover for just about any sort of group. An entire campaign can be based around superspies and assassins masquerading as

roving archaeologists, stopping the nefarious schemes of evil masterminds and rogue government factions. Likewise, a pack of werewolves or vampires could hide their nature (and depressions) behind the façade of migrant field technicians.

All these amazing discoveries and many more were of cities and kingdoms thought for centuries to have been nothing but myth, but strong-willed and imaginative individuals proved them real beyond any shadow of a doubt.

– Preston Peet,
Underground!

MODERN ARCHAEOLOGY IN NORTH AMERICA

Archaeology is the study of past cultures through their material remains – basically learning about the past by digging through their garbage. At its core, archaeology concerns itself with anything a human has made, altered, or directly impacted. Human remains dating to before the modern era (roughly anything over 50 years in the ground) are also under the purview of archaeologists. Archaeology differs from region to region, so this piece concentrates on how the science and business is conducted in North America. Although many think archaeology is limited to the work of universities or government agencies, in truth, most archaeological work is done far outside these institutions. According to federal, state, provincial, and sometimes local law in the United States, Mexico, and Canada, archaeological sites are protected from looting and destruction. This creates a problem when a new road or waterline needs to be built, especially if it impacts a known archaeological site.

For those doing additional research on their own: "Shovelbum" is sometimes spelled as one word.

This is when a cultural resource management (CRM) firm is called in. In CRM, the goal is to mediate the impact of new construction on archaeological sites and, if necessary, excavate the site before the bulldozers come in. The usual client for a CRM firm is a governmental body, but developers, construction companies, and others may need to call on some archaeologists from time to time.

ANATOMY OF AN ARCHAEOLOGICAL SITE

An archaeological site can be a confusing and dangerous place. There are trenches and open pits spread around, tools and heavy equipment lying about, and tents erected at key locations. This can present a bewildering sight for visitors and provide an excellent scene for combat encounters. The general layout for a site under excavation is to have a central tent that functions as a field lab and office, one or more test trenches, several open units (one-yard-square excavated pits), a few units covered with tarps, screens used to separate artifacts from soil, and an area where cars and heavy equipment (bulldozers, backhoes, and graders) are parked. At each open unit or test trench, the archaeologist working that location has a pile of tools and other sundries. There are also five-gallon buckets of soil sitting around, as well as bags of soil samples waiting to go to the lab for analysis (usually in 30-gallon trash bags). The whole area is also liberally marked with surveyor's pins and flagging tape. More remote sites have their own water supply (even if it's just pumped from the nearest creek) and a small tent city where the archaeologists retire for the evening.

Each site can be categorized by the phase of investigation it is in, numbered from I, II, and III.

Phase I

Phase I sites are the initial investigation, and it is not always determined at this point that a site may be present. First, researchers investigate the area to determine where any sites may be located, with special consideration of the landscape and historical records. This is followed by a walking-surface survey – a long and often boring activity. Archaeologists walk an area that is suspected of containing a site looking for artifacts on the surface, probing the area by making four-inch-deep test holes with their shovels. Often these holes are 10 yards apart, and in a large area, that results in a lot of small holes in the ground. Areas that are very likely to contain a site may have a test trench dug. These trenches are usually three yards wide, 20 yards long, and four yards deep. By law they need to be braced before anyone enters (it takes less than a yard of collapsing soil to kill a person), but often in the interest of expediency are not. Archaeologists enter the test trench in order to look for artifacts and diagram the subsoil. If evidence of a site is found, the project may move to Phase II or, if there is enough money in the budget, ground penetrating radar or aerial photography is used to investigate further.

Phase II

In Phase II, the site begins to look like the stereotypical archaeological excavation seen in movies. Phase I investigation continues in order to define the boundaries of the site while hand-excavated units are dug. A hand-excavated unit is dug by shovel and trowel in four-inch increments called levels. This soil is then dumped into buckets and taken to the screens where it is processed to remove the soil and leave the artifacts. After each level of a unit is excavated, it is diagramed and photographed before the next level is begun.

There are two types of screens that are commonly used, both worked by hand. A dry screen is a wire mesh in a frame that is rocked back and forth to shake the soil loose. A wet screen is of similar design, but uses water jets to rinse away the soil.

Most units are dug by pairs of archaeologists who take turns digging and screening. A tight bond usually develops between people working the same units for weeks on end.

When we get to our survey areas, we grab our gear and start surveying. The main goal is for us to find sites – historic and prehistoric.

– Trent De Boer, Shovel Bum

Phase III

The final phase, Phase III, is much like Phase II but more intensive and with the aim of excavating the entire site. Most sites don't reach this stage as the Phase II investigation usually determines if the site is worth preserving; anything not an artifact is reburied, reports are typed, and the crew moves on. If a site is of great importance, is threatened with imminent destruction, or contains human remains, then Phase III is called for. Units are dug across the entire site and every artifact needs to be collected, plotted on a map, and analyzed. For an independent CRM company, this means steady work and lots of cash.

CREATING A SHOVEL BUM

For heroic campaigns that border on the realistic, shovel bums should be built on 50-100 points. Most of the points should go into attributes and skills. Because all shovel bums have at least a bachelor's degree and the work is very strenuous, IQ and HT are the most important attributes. Shovel bums move a lot of soil in a normal workday – 25,600 cubic inches of dirt a day on average – so ST is good for moving heavy loads. DX applies to some of the more-relevant skills. Increasing Will, Per, and FP can also prove useful.

An old-hand shovel bum might be "recruited" by the Black Box (see pp. 13-19) for interesting missions.

In addition to a number of languages (you study other cultures after all), advantages should be of the more mundane sort and not take up a large number of points. Good choices include: Absolute Direction, Acute Senses, Allies (former professors or employers), Ambidexterity, Appearance levels (for that fit and rugged look), Charisma, Claim to Hospitality (for when you need somewhere to crash for the night), Common Sense, Contacts or Contact Group (academia, business, indigenous groups), Cultural Adaptability, Cultural Familiarity, Eidetic Memory, Empathy, Favor, Fit, Flexibility (for getting into tight spaces), High Manual Dexterity, Language Talent, Less Sleep, Lightning Calculator, Reputation, and Single-Minded. Various Talents and perks are also appropriate.

Physical or mental disadvantages that would limit a person's ability to perform archaeological fieldwork are poor choices. These would include: Amnesia, Bad Back, Bad Grip, Blindness, Cannot Learn, Cannot Speak, Colorblindness (solid color is critical in soil analysis), Confused, Dyslexia, Ham-Fisted, Innumerate, Intolerance (very rare among archaeologists), No Fine Manipulators, Quadriplegic, Unfit, and Very Fat. This is not to say that people with these disadvantages could not be shovel bums; they merely face an almost insurmountable obstacle.

The Abkani mysteriously vanished from the Earth. Only a few artifacts remained, hidden in the world's most remote places. These artifacts speak of terrifying creatures that thrive in the darkness, waiting for the day when the gate can be opened again.

– Lionel Hudgens,
Alone in the Dark

The following disadvantages would be good choices: Addiction and Alcoholism (smoking and heavy drinking are far too common among shovel bums), Appearance (for that *too* rugged look), Bad Sight, Bad Smell, Bad Temper (again, far too common), Bully, Callous (especially for forensic archaeologists), Chronic Depression, Chronic Pain (carpal tunnel syndrome), Chummy, Clueless, Compulsive Behavior (long hours away from civilization do strange things to people), Curious, Dependents, Disciplines of Faith, Enemies (former classmates or employers), Gluttony, Insomniac, Lecherousness (it's a way to fill the long hours on the road), Low Empathy (typical among those who work exclusively with human remains), Manic-Depressive (from way too

much time alone in a hotel room), Miserliness (you don't have much money, why spend it?), Obsession (usually proving a pet theory), Odious Personal Habits (after a while on the road, you just don't care), Wealth (generally Struggling), and various quirks (typically minor versions of mental disadvantages).

Shovel bums have a broad range of skills that reflect an education as an anthropologist as well as experience and training as an archaeologist. The most important skills related to field archaeology are: Anthropology, Archaeology, Cartography, Computer Operation, Driving (Automobile most commonly, though Construction Equipment could be useful), Electronics Operation (Media and Scientific), Expert Skill (specific era or culture), Geology (you are working with soil), History, Mathematics (Statistics and Surveying), Navigation, Research, Sociology, and Writing. Other useful skills include: Area Knowledge (either a specific region or more likely North America), Astronomy (for those specializing in the relation between stellar phenomena and ancient sites), Biology, Carousing (for those who did more than study in college), Chemistry, Climbing (some sites are very out of the way), Cooking (specializing in campfire or hotel microwave), Economics, Electronics Repair (for when equipment fails), Engineer (Mining), First Aid (people get hurt all the time), Games (for those long hours in the hotel room), Geography, Hiking, Law (there is a whole body of law concerning artifacts and cultural resources), Linguistics, Mechanic (for when the old Jeep breaks down), Metallurgy, Photography (often needed, but rarely seen in the field), Professional Skill (Field Technician), Psychology, Public Speaking (for presenting papers at conferences), Survival (for back-of-beyond sites), Teaching (also generally lacking at the university level), and Typing. Skills beyond those listed above are possible; just about every academic discipline has a cross over with archaeology (historical archaeology, experimental archaeology, geoarchaeology, ethnoarchaeology, archaeoastronomy, archaeobiology). Outdoor skills can also be useful, and are very common as most archaeologists enjoy hiking and camping (at least when they don't have to do so for months at a time). Combat skills should be rare and difficult to justify, though some mix a love of the outdoors with a love of killing and eating wild animals (and thus have skill in Bow, Gun, or Stealth). Some archaeologists practice "theoretical" archaeology, a subdiscipline that involves recreating ancient skills and materials. These individuals would have Armoury/TL0-4 and appropriate weapon skills to correspond. Hobby Skills are also common, and many shovel bums practice handicrafts, follow some aspect of pulp culture, or are even roleplayers.

SHOVEL-BUM TEMPLATES

Here are a few ready-made templates to form the basis for shovel-bum heroes or NPCs. Some of these templates include Area Knowledge and languages, which may be taken multiple times to cover different regions or tongues.

A shovel bum makes a great contact, occasional ally, or adventure-starter for globetrotting heroes: "Ted! What are you doing here?!"

We're not looking for treasure; it's anathema to the underwater archaeologist. To even mention treasure, you're a pariah . . . but it could always happen.

– Ray McAllister

The Fresh Face

68 points

This is a person just out of college and embarking on the exciting and rewarding life of a shovel bum. In the first few years, he will refine and broaden the skills he learned in college and field school, and develop an archaeological specialty. After a year or two tramping around from site to site, most fresh faces either move up to grad school or on to other careers.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 12 [20].

Secondary Characteristics: Dmg 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 12 [0]; Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 15 points chosen from among Absolute Direction [5], Acute Vision [2/level], Ally (Favorite professor; Built on 100%; 9 or less) [5], Charisma 1-3 [5/level], Contact Group (Academia or Indigenous group; Skill-15; 6 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [5], Cultural Familiarity (Any) [1], Eidetic Memory [5], Empathy [15], Language Talent [10], or Languages (Spanish, French, or any ancient) [2-6/language].

Disadvantages: -20 points chosen from among Chummy [-5], Clueless [-10], Compulsive Carousing [-5*], Curious [-5*], Enemy (Classmate; Rival; 9 or less) [-5], or Wealth (Struggling) [-10].

Primary Skills: Archaeology and Anthropology, both (H) IQ [4]-12. ● One of Computer Operation/TL8 (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Navigation/TL8, Research/TL8, or Writing, all (A) IQ [2]-12; or Expert Skill (Specific era or culture), Geology/TL8, History (Any), or Sociology, all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11.

Secondary Skills: Two of Astronomy/TL8, Chemistry/TL8, Economics, Geography/TL8, or Linguistics, all (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; or Biology/TL8 (VH) IQ-3 [1]-9.

Background Skills: One of Carousing (E) HT [1]-12; Climbing (A) DX-1 [1]-9; First Aid/TL8 (E) IQ [1]-12; Games (E) IQ [1]-12; Hiking (A) HT-1 [1]-11; Public Speaking (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Survival (Any) (A) Per-1 [1]-11; or Typing (E) DX [1]-10.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

The Old Hand

100 points

An old hand has been a shovel bum for at least five years, and likely more. These sorts mix a wealth of skill and experience with a body and spirit that are starting to degrade. Old hands need to routinely rediscover their love of the profession, or risk burnout. However, if you need someone who can “move some dirt” and who knows the tricks of the trade, you need an old hand. Old hands also fill the ranks of crew chief, a position of some authority, high responsibility, and little pay. Some old hands are grad students working the summer digging season for experience and pay.

Attribute: ST 12 [20]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 12 [20].

Secondary Characteristics: Dmg 1d-1/1d+2; BL 29 lbs; HP 12 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 13 [3]; Basic Speed 5.50 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 20 points chosen from Appearance (Attractive) [4], Absolute Direction [5], Acute Sense (Vision) [2/level], Ally (Former professor; Built on 100%; 9 or less) [5], Ambidexterity [5], Charisma 1-3 [5/level], Claim to Hospitality (Old college buddies) [1], Common Sense [10], Contact Group (Academia, Specific CRM business, or Indigenous group; Skill-15; 6 or less; Usually Reliable) [10], Cultural Adaptability [10], Cultural Familiarity (Any) [1], Eidetic Memory [5], Empathy [15], Favor (Former employer or classmate; Built on 100%; 9 or less) [1], Fit [5], Flexibility [5], High Manual Dexterity 1-4 [5/level], Language Talent [10], Languages (Spanish, French, or any ancient) [2-6/language], Less Sleep [2/level], Lightning Calculator [2], or Single-Minded [5].

Disadvantages: -45 points from the following: Addiction (Tobacco) [-5], Alcoholism [-15], Appearance (Unattractive) [-4], Bad Sight (Mitigator, Eyeglasses, -60%) [-10], Bad Smell [-10], Bad Temper [-10*], Bully [-10*], Callous [-5], Chronic Depression [-15*], Chronic Pain (Mild; 8 hours; 9 or less) [-10], Chummy [-5], Clueless [-10], Compulsive Carousing [-5*], Compulsive Gambling [-5*], Curious [-5*], Enemy (Classmate; Rival; 9 or less) [-5], Insomniac [-10], Lecherousness [-15*], Low Empathy [-20], Manic-Depressive [-20], Miserliness [-10*], Odious Personal Habit (Talks endlessly about favorite historical era) [-5], or Wealth (Struggling) [-10].

I feel better just knowing there's an archaeologist watching our backs.

– Lieutenant Kershaw,
Stargate SG-1 #5.20

Keep a shovel-bum character on hand made at roughly the point total of the campaign, for those times when a new player needs a one-shot PC (say, if his normal hero is incapacitated or lost).

Primary Skills: Archaeology and Anthropology, both (H) IQ+2 [12]-14. • Two of Computer Operation/TL8 (E) IQ+2 [4]-14; Navigation/TL8, Research/TL8, or Writing, all (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; or Expert Skill (Specific era or culture), Geology/TL8, History (Any), or Sociology, all (H) IQ [4]-12.

Secondary Skills: 8 points chosen from Driving/TL8 (Automobile or Construction Equipment) (A) DX [2]-10; Cartography/TL8, Electronics Operation/TL8 (Media or Scientific), Electronics Repair/TL8 (Media or Scientific), Mechanic/TL8 (Any), Photography/TL8, or Professional Skill (Field Technician), all (A) IQ [2]-12; Astronomy/TL8, Chemistry/TL8, Economics, Geography/TL8, or Linguistics, all (H) IQ [4]-12; or Biology/TL8 (VH) IQ-1 [4]-11.

Background Skills: 2 points chosen from Area Knowledge (Specific region of North America) (E) IQ [1]-12; Carousing (E) HT [1]-12; Climbing (A) DX [2]-10; Cooking (A) IQ [2]-12; First Aid/TL8 (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Games (E) IQ+1 [2]+13; Hiking (A) HT [2]-12; Public Speaking (A) IQ [2]-12; Survival (any) (A) Per [2]-12; or Typing (E) DX+1 [2]-11.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

So forget any ideas you've got about lost cities, exotic travel, and digging up the world. We do not follow maps to buried treasure and "X" never, ever marks the spot. Seventy percent of all archaeology is done in the library. Research. Reading.

*– Indiana Jones,
Indiana Jones and
the Last Crusade*

Lens: The Principal Investigator

+32 points

A principal investigator must have a master's degree. He oversees the work of an entire field crew, directs the scope of archaeological exploration, and manages the paperwork needed to comply with local, state, and federal regulations. The principle investigator is the person in charge on site, and

as such has the most responsibility and highest pay. Often these people have shovel bummed for years before attending grad school.

For starting characters built with this lens, the Ally may be a former employer.

Advantages: An additional 10 points chosen from among those listed in the old-hand template.

Skills: Law (Cultural Resource Management) (H) IQ [4]-12.

- A further 4 points in both Archaeology and Anthropology, bringing them both to (H) IQ+3 [16]-15.
- A further 4 points in new primary skills.
- A further 4 points in new secondary skills, which may also include Mathematics/TL8 (Statistics or Surveying) or Metallurgy/TL8, both (H) IQ-1 [2]-11.
- A further 2 points in new background skills.

WITH TROWEL IN HAND: A HEROIC SHOVEL-BUM CAMPAIGN SETTING

Since before mankind, there have been things that lurk in the spaces between spaces. They hunger to satiate perverse desires far beyond the ken of mere mortals. In millennia past, the ancient peoples fought these monstrosities, driving some from this universe and binding others into centuries of slumber. Through the procession of eons, the cultures that purged the world of this taint have died or evolved into distinctly different forms. Forbidden lore was often lost or destroyed by waves of invading barbarians. Eventually bound things break their prisons, banished horrors return, and humanity must once more fight for its very existence. When the cycle renews, brave and wise sages must either recover lost knowledge or find new ways to carry on the fight. This is one of those times, and the PCs are the heroes.

The ruins of the ancient peoples of North America can take many forms and have origins that spread across centuries. From the effigy mounds of the Upper Mississippi Valley to the jungle-shrouded ruins of the Mayan cities, ancient First Nations built colossal and impressive works. Not all of these monuments and temples have been found, and most of the known are poorly explored or understood. Of those who have investigated their mysteries, only a few have unearthed the truth that these ancient ruins hold back terrors that could destroy the world – terrors that exist beyond physicality, waiting for the clock to turn and the cycle to begin once more.

Some of those who have gleaned the truth wish to use these secrets for their own purposes; others have gone mad, possessed by the forbidden teachings they have uncovered. A stalwart few have looked into that yawning darkness and spit in its eye. These individuals cannot go to the authorities to warn them for fear of being locked away as insane – or worse, tipping off those who would unleash these horrors. Instead they have formed a secret underground network of archivists, librarians, curators, professors, historians, tribal shamans, and shovel bums.

With these templates of various point totals, it's possible to have the same shovel bum show up as the campaign progresses, switching to a new template or adding the lens as time passes.

It is the latter who serve as the frontline troops in this shadowy war, quite literally in the trenches. The shovel bums can live off the grid and below the radar, and they have access to archaeological sites and special library or museum collections.

Shovel bums are the ones doing the difficult and dangerous fieldwork that provides the weapons and knowledge that the more sedentary members of the conspiracy then use to bind or banish the things. The heroes of the campaign are responsible for much more than just digging up artifacts and packing them for shipment. Sure, there are many missions that revolve around working a site and surreptitiously seeing that a certain carving or relic makes its way to the right museum. There are many others that involve seeking out new sites and fighting the minions of those who would use ancient secrets for their own selfish purposes.

Before trowel can be placed to soil, a site has to be found. The shovel bums are instrumental in this, as they have their ears to the ground (literally and figuratively). Although most of North America has been thoroughly mapped, broad swatches of territory rarely see the boot of man. In these areas lay forgotten ruins or lost artifacts – things that both the shovel bums and their foes desperately want to find. This search may lead the intrepid heroes into the steaming jungles of the Yucatan or the frigid lands of Nunavut – though less exotic, more perilous locales include the settled areas of the continent. What strange horrors lurk beneath a suburban subdivision or a blighted urban neighborhood, or have been plowed over by fields of corn?

This campaign is one of exploration, conspiracy, and supernatural horror. Magic should be rare and extremely dangerous – something the heroes are likely to not know or want to use. The lost secrets of the ancients are there for the finding, but what effects will these millennia-old magics have on the modern day? Is the risk worth it, or can other ways to put the horrors back in their tombs be found?

Use the Path/Book ritual magic rules from *GURPS Thaumatology* (pp. 122-162) with the Energy Accumulating model, assuming low mana. This makes magic very difficult and dangerous to work, thus keeping the heroes from casting too many divination spells and just walking to the site. Beginning PCs shouldn't start off with any magical skills; these should be discovered as the campaign progresses and "new"

Shovel Bums and the Real World

Even in settings that focus on supernatural threats, not every adventure with shovel-bum protagonists needs to be one of finding and putting down the terror from beyond; in fact, such a campaign would quickly become a series of monster-of-the-week scenarios. It's best to combine any unworldly threats with mundane challenges such as looters, rival academics, and irate locals (it's not unheard of for people who don't want archaeologists around to threaten and shoot at shovel bums).

In Mesoamerica, local gangs or bandits often charge archaeological teams protection money, and troubles with gun-toting thugs are always a problem. Looters may take the form of skulking thieves who slip in and steal artifacts, or they may be armed bandits in their own right using a combination of firepower and dynamite to acquire the artifacts they desire. An adventure could revolve around a well-armed group of looters who swoop in on a remote excavation and force the archaeologists to work at gunpoint.

ancient knowledge is unearthed. For the adventurers, useful Paths are: Dreams, Knowledge, Nature, Protection, and Spirit (especially the Bind and Exorcise rituals). Avoid Paths not central to the theme (such as the Path of Elements) or inappropriate because ancient peoples wouldn't have developed them (such as the Path of Gadgets). The adversaries of the campaign may have access other Paths, such as the Path of Cunning and the Path of Form. Artifacts discovered may well be charms, fetishes, foci, (rare) power items, or even malefices.

Adventures can run the gamut from high action to dark terror, and can either be episodic or contain longer story arcs that span a "season." In addition to fighting the forces that seek to destroy the world, the heroes have to contend with more mundane challenges (see above).

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ken Spencer is a freelance writer and former archaeologist who shovel bummed for several years. His work has been published by Chaosium and Alephlar Games, and he has a monthly column, *A Bit of History*, on rpg.net.

Here's a thought. The next time someone discovers a mummy or a frozen corpse or a perfectly preserved squirrel from the 12th century, we leave it right where it is.

– Nigel Bailey, Relic Hunter #3.16

RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

THE ACCIDENTAL EXPLORER

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

Let's say that you've got three broad-stroke categories of exploration eras: past, present, and future. One might be tempted to turn those three categories into three successive issues of a long-running magazine, if one were so inclined.

(For the purposes of our hypothetical three-issue series, we're assuming "modern" is roughly 18th century through next Sunday, A.D.)

Now, an observer – or columnist – might ask himself: "What sets apart modern-day exploration from its past or future counterparts?" While not claiming to be a definitive examination of this question, this installment of *Random Thought Table* nevertheless posits one interesting possibility – all the while awkwardly avoiding use of the first person, which I dislike. (Whoops . . .)

Anyway, with the modern era – especially as portrayed in popular fiction – it's possible to be an *accidental* explorer.

In the past, becoming an explorer is a often a lifetime devotion and something of a career path. (Sure, it's one of those crazy "high chance of dying" career paths, but so were a lot of jobs back then.) If you weren't an explorer, you presumably stayed home – or perhaps kept to the trodden paths of soldiers looking to improve their neighbors' lives by parting them from the burden of land and the temptation of wealth. Otherwise, the explorer's life was a deliberate one in bygone eras.

The same applies to futuristic explorers – especially the stereotypical "boldly going where no one has gone before" exploration universe. It's unlikely someone in the year 2525 will wake up, put on a spacesuit, leave their spaceship, start poking around a comet, slap their helmeted forehead, and wonder, "How did I get here?!"

WHEN SUDDENLY . . .

Now, compare this with a stereotypical recent-past exploration story. You're a lawman in the Old West, investigating reports of strange noises in the hills over yonder. You go poking around and suddenly, you're deep underground, search

through some weird cavern system with ties to the natives – and perhaps something older.

Or you're a teenager in 1940, hanging out with a few friends near Montignac, France. Suddenly you unearth the site of perhaps the most famous Paleolithic cave paintings ever.

Or you're on a weekend jaunt to do some spelunking with some college buddies. You're following a map, everything's going fine – and suddenly, your descent has gone awry and you're fighting for your life against eyeless subterranean horrors

In all of these, the protagonists found themselves unexpectedly in the role of "explorer" – sometimes for an afternoon, sometimes for the rest of their lives (ahem).

CLOSE ENOUGH BUT NOT TOO FAR

So what makes the modern era more conducive to the accidental explorer?

Obviously, many of these tales write for the audience. Modern audiences contain a dearth of Vikings or gene-modded catgirl astronauts, so it's likely that many storytellers incorporate the implicit idea that "it could happen to *you!*" Let's ignore that aspect.

More philosophically, the modern era starts with a base assumption of safety in many parts of the world. If you're a Westerner, you don't really need to worry about barbarians storming over nearby hills and setting things on fire. Even Europe has gone a few decades without erupting into global conflict.

Although the civilized world has been made 99% safe, there's a lot of wiggle room in that remaining 1%. From an adventuring standpoint, the folks who get tangled up in that fractional sliver of unsafety usually do so *because* they feel safe. After all, what could possibly happen to spelunkers in a national park?

*For more ideas on keeping adventurers out of touch with civilization, see [The Cell Phone Problem](#) in *GURPS Action 2*.*

The Accidental Campaign

Admittedly, it's hard to use the accidental explorer in an ongoing campaign. Nevertheless, for gamers who like a somewhat tongue-in-cheek approach to their campaigns, it is possible to envision an ongoing series that's a string of random occurrences.

From a game standpoint, one or more PCs should have Unluckiness, Cursed, Weirdness Magnet, or something similarly evocative that explains why the heroes keep getting into these situations.

From a setting standpoint, the adventurers should have positions in society that allow them to keep getting into exploratory predicaments (ideally without having their lives be ruined). Reporters, writers, photographers, scientists, and shovel bums (see pp. 30-35) would all have reasons for traveling the globe and falling through the cracks of civilization into unsafe vistas.

For this idea to work, the players will probably need to suspend disbelief and refrain from loading up their heroes with supplies or other essential goodies that will make their lives easier during their inevitable misadventures. In the same way that no one notices that the heroine of *Murder, She Wrote* never takes precautions even though she'll inevitably become an amateur sleuth in a homicide investigation, so too should ongoing accidental explorers treat each new incident with fresh, unprepared eyes. If the gamers want their heroes to evolve into savvy modern-day explorers who eventually realize their fates and work around them, that's probably best served by slowly buying off the disadvantage(s) mentioned above that make their unlikely exploits possible. (Of course, regardless of how the "accidental" part is justified, snarky asides and moans of "Why does this always happen to us?!" are always welcome.)

This feeling of safety also extends from modern perceptions that society has rendered "unsafe" elements safer than they sometimes are. A quintessential example of this phenomenon is how a number of people die every year on locations such as the Grand Canyon by falling over the edge; in a world of guardrails and brightly colored black-and-yellow edge markers, it's inconceivable to some that parts of the "civilized" world can lead to death for the unwary. That same mindset can easily lead to someone becoming an accidental explorer; someone capable of falling one mile to certain death is just as likely to slide 20 feet into an unexplored cavern.

Finally, many people in an accidental exploration situation assume that the area they're investigating is more known than it is. "This park has been adjacent to the city for over a century; surely it must be well-mapped and fully plotted by now!" (Of course, even if this is true on paper, if the last survey was 100 years ago, a lot can change in the interim . . .)

THE ACCIDENTAL EXPLORER IN AN RPG

In the world of gaming, the accidental explorer is an excellent idea for a one-shot adventure (either by itself or as part of a larger campaign); all that's required is for the heroes to be somewhere they think is reasonably safe, only to accidentally uncover something that needs investigating.

Here are a few tips for incorporating this trope into an RPG.

Think down. As shown in the previous examples, many modern instances of accidental explorers come from ending up underground. It's an easy concept to introduce; after all, every place that has a ground must have something that's "under" that.

Home isn't easy. In most classic "accidental explorer" tales, the protagonists are denied the easy return path, and much of the narrative thrust comes from finding a way out. It's possible to structure an adventure such that the heroes can turn around and head back the way they came – say, if the goal of the adventure is to track down a missing child who's wandered to where the heroes are exploring – but usually it's strongest just to avoid the possibility of backtracking.

Help isn't forthcoming. In just about every modern accidental explorer tale, cell phones don't work. (Here's where that underground premise really pays off; it's easy to explain why cell phones don't work beneath the earth!) Similarly, other means of calling for help are impossible or very difficult. It's up to the heroes to extract themselves.

Exploration is key. Although it may seem obvious, often the delight – and horror – of the accidental exploration adventure is that the heroes are poking around their surroundings; they may have no other goal outside of seeing the sights while getting home. If possible, such a tale should avoid having too many subplots or evil schemes that the heroes are responsible for thwarting, instead letting them provide the story's energy by the journey itself – and perhaps becoming involved with plots surrounding the unusual residents of the stumbled-across area. (As a thought exercise, imagine a "realistic" *Alice in Wonderland* – perhaps an abandoned subway system with odd disenfranchised denizens and a twisted internal logic that requires wits and wile to navigate.)

In a way, accidental exploration is "convenient" in the way that modern life is; such an adventure isn't something that needs to be actively sought out and planned for, but can be something that is merely stumbled upon. This isn't a bad thing; as the saying goes, some people have greatness thrust upon them. In addition, such an adventure makes an ideal "origin" story – an initial adventure that throws the heroes together and gives them a reason to keep associating . . . perhaps for seeking further discoveries. After all, if 1% of the investigators' world contains the makings of adventure, that's still more than enough geography to allow them to be explorers for as long as they live.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

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

ODDS AND ENDS

THE \$200 CHALLENGE

This adventure scenario is for gamers who like to (virtually) shop.

The heroes are somehow informed ahead of time that they will be dropped into an unfamiliar area – away from civilization – and expected to get back home. They each have \$200 to outfit themselves in any way they can, assuming they start with nothing (not even the clothes on their back – they need to buy those). The heroes can equip themselves however they like, using whatever method they want to spend their \$200; they can't steal anything, but they can use skills and contacts to get bargains. The heroes can't pool their money, and they can't discuss their purchases with each other. There's no charge assumed for reasonable prep work, such as downloading the (free) Wikipedia archive to a purchased thumb drive.

Once they're outfitted, they're whisked away to someplace – GM's choice. Using only their skills and (especially) the gear they purchased, they need to survive and make their way home.

This works best if the PCs are built on a smaller number of points and have an "everyman" quality to them; someone who dumps 48 points in Survival is going to have a much easier time with this challenge.

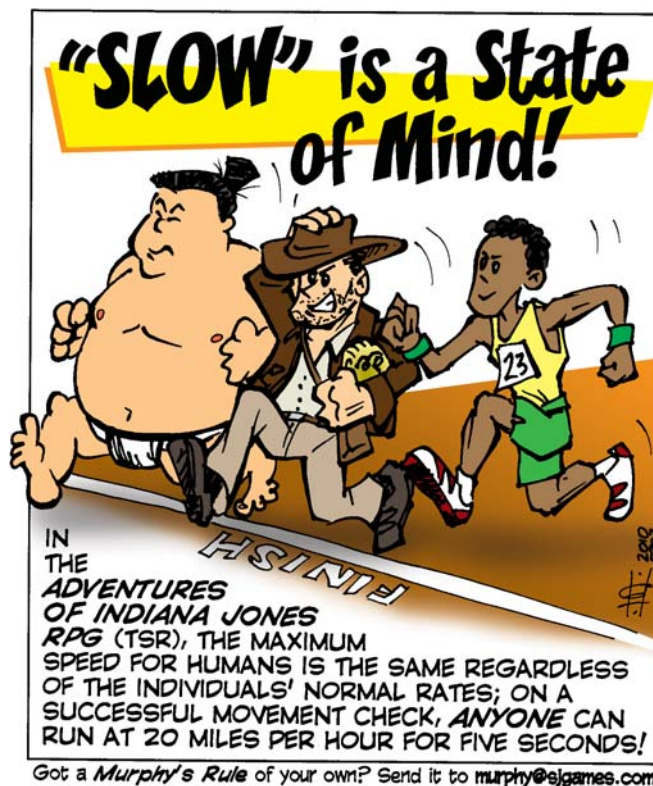
It's up to the GM to come up with a justification for this adventure's unusual premise. Maybe it's a test by a secret organization (perhaps *The Black Box*, pp. 13-19?) to determine the resourcefulness of the heroes. Perhaps there is a "reality show" aspect of this. A scientific institute might have established this challenge to get in-the-field research for which \$200 packages are most useful to explorers; the organization may intend to develop relatively affordable survival kits for a different purpose.

This scenario can also work well as a self-contained filler adventure when only one or two players can show up to a session.

As a bonus challenge, the heroes might find themselves in some other *time!* If they hoped a cell phone would save them, they might be out of luck even a decade ago.

MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND



Shocking Secrets of Modern Discoveries

Here are some less-than-serious plot points for a modern-day exploration campaign.

- Upon successfully translating Linear A, it turns out that it's actually a form of Greek leet speak.
- Archeologists uncover cryptic horizontal plates engraved with strange characters – curiously, no more than 140 characters per plate.
- In fact, the huge stone contraption isn't designed to observe the stars; it *controls* them. The heavens haven't been working right ever since it broke down ages ago.

- The heroes uncover an underground mining railway facility, which has worked perfectly for 400 years. Curiously, it's located a half-mile below the modern subway system, which hasn't worked right in the 10 years it's been open.
- The explorers discover the remains of a cult of blood-thirsty killers. The cultists died of starvation years ago; they thought someone was going to show up a *lot* earlier than they did.
- Careless investigators trigger a trap that unleashes a gargantuan cube-shaped boulder – *much* easier to escape from than the usual spherical model.

APPENDIX Z

THE SECRET OF THE LOST

Here are some items and locations from previous issues of *Pyramid* that can prove interesting hooks for modern-day explorers.



- The ruins of the Guildhall of the Hermetic Brotherhood (*Pyramid* #3/1: *Tools of the Trade – Wizards*, which includes maps of that location).

- A 40-foot-tall drum capable of summoning something almost beyond human comprehension (“.” *Is for Full-Stop Drum*, from *Pyramid* #3/1: *Tools of the Trade – Wizards*).

- A means of entry into the realm of the Tolzec empire, perhaps

piercing the barrier between their dimension and ours (Señor Q, one of the *Small-Time Conquerors* from *Pyramid* #3/2: *Looks Like a Job for . . . Superheroes*).

- Ancient evidence that details the coming of the Visitor, destined to arrive sometime soon – maybe by that popular end-of-the-world date, 2012 . . . (*The Day the World Broke*, from *Pyramid* #3/3: *Venturing into the Badlands – Post-Apocalypse*).

- Information on a long-lost power of great use to the military (secrets belonging to *The Society of Siege Sorcerers*, from *Pyramid* #3/4: *Magic on the Battlefield*).

- A cache of clay bricks able to tap otherworldly power (*The Bricks of Marû-Dû*, from *Pyramid* #3/5: *Horror & Spies*).

- A stone tablet or ancient document that serves as a “Rosetta Stone” for another language (use the Alien Communication Cards idea from *Odds and Ends*, *Pyramid* #3/6: *Space Colony Alpha*).

- Evidence of the traitor to the Egyptian pantheon that led to the fall of Heliopolis, and/or artifacts of interest to the modern-day resurrected Egyptian gods (*The New Kingdom*, from *Pyramid* #3/7: *Urban Fantasy*).

- An alien artifact that serves as a Madness Bomb (*Doomsday Weapons*, from *Pyramid* #3/9: *Space Opera*).

- The Temple of Sobek, the Crocodile God – perhaps occupied and in use . . . (*Pyramid* #3/11: *Cinematic Locations*, which also includes a map).

- An earthbound version of the Nectar Box (*Pyramid* #3/12: *Tech and Toys*).

- An arcane tome containing enough knowledge to bring Red Diabolism to the world (*Pyramid* #3/13: *Thaumatology*).

- The perilous Plateau of Leng, home of strange, sadistic horned men who seek to make bizarre bargains with the heroes (*The Groom of the Spider Princess*, from *Pyramid* #3/14: *Martial Arts*).

- The City of the Caesars or the Fountain of Youth (both from *Pyramid* #3/16: *Historical Exploration*).



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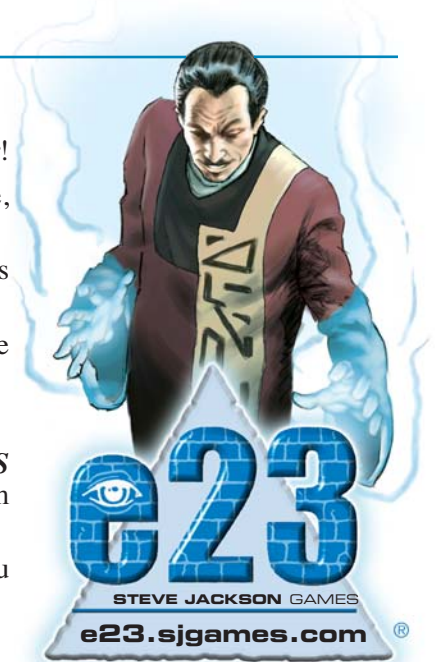
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