

RED MOON MEDICINE SHOW PRESENTS:

VACANT RITUAL ASSEMBLY

AN OSR ZINE - ISSUE #3 - SUMMER 2015



INTRODUCING

Issue #3 is going to be a little different. The first two issues of this zine have been based on miscellaneous material that I developed for my ongoing *LotFP* campaign. This one contains stuff from the same campaign, but it's less miscellaneous and almost more of a mini supplement.

For years, I've been running the occasional D&D game in a mythologized version of the woods behind the house where I grew up, a place that my buddies and I referred to as "Dragon Trench." The goal here was to capture that adolescent mythology and insert it as a game-able area in my campaign.

The Legend of Dragon Trench (3-4) explains the origin stories of the Trench, real and imagined.

Crawling the Trench (5-8) covers the stats and procedures you need to hexcrawl the place as well as the descriptions of a few important sites.

Knights of the Dragon Clan (9-10) covers the protectors of the Lost Forest and their modest stronghold.

The Thundercloud Druids (11-12) came about because I wanted an interesting way to explain the origin of firearms in my campaign.

Tales of the Timberwives (13) the Timberwives came from a creepy dream that a friend of mine related to me.

The Grand Vespiary (14-18) is an adventure that sets up the primary villain of the Lost Forest region.

Rick's Moving Castle (19-22) is an interview with Rick Saada, the creator of *Castle of the Winds*, a computer game that was very influential on my gaming back in the Dragon Trench days.

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Interviewee
Rick Saada



CAMPAIGN UPDATE

My campaign has expanded by the inclusion of an additional play group. I'm now running a weekly game for a group composed entirely of French Quarter tour guides (my co-workers). Turns out most of them are big nerds, but relatively few had played rpgs before. I started by running them through *The Sleeping Place of the Feathered Swine* by Logan Knight and for the last couple of sessions they've been exploring Dragon Trench as it appears in this issue.

Meanwhile, my original group departed from Dretcher's Bay (from VRA#2) on a sea voyage and have spent the last three sessions exploring *The Worthy Bones*, which is an adventure I wrote (and may or may not publish eventually) concerning an ancient Dwarven necropolis on a forgotten island haunted by witch apes.

It hasn't really come up yet in this campaign, but running multiple groups in a persistent world is one of my absolute favorite things to do. I love it when the groups' exploits start affecting each other. If anything notable comes about because of this I'll let you know.

LEGAL CRAP

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EVANGELISM

This issue's evangelism is retrospective in nature. These are the works that influenced me most back in the Dragon Trench days.

FILM/TV

The Lord of the Rings (1978) - I used to watch the Ralph Bakshi version of *LotR* constantly. It's the single biggest influence on my early days of gaming.

Xena: Warrior Princess and *Hercules: The Legendary Journeys* - I used to watch these every Sunday night, usually while painting miniatures or working on other dweebish endeavors. Gabrielle (Renee O'Connor) inspired such lust in my teenage heart that concentration was often difficult.

RPG STUFF

Middle-earth Roleplaying 2nd Edition by Iron Crown Enterprises - *MERP* was the first RPG core book I ever owned. My mom forbade me to buy/play *D&D* stuff, but *MERP* was deemed okay because it had "Elves and Hobbits and stuff." Tons of my early gaming material was drawn from this book plus micellaneous copies of *Dragon Magazine*. And that brings us to . . .

Dragon Magazine #217 - I gave a shout to this issue in VRA#1 because I *still* use the giant table of magic items it contains. Crucially, the table names the items but doesn't describe their effects.

THE LEGEND OF DRAGON TRENCH

Deep in the Lost Forest there is a place called Dragon Trench. They say this is the final resting place of the tyrant dragon Redwrath, where he fell from the sky after his brow was split by a hero's arrow. They say the beast struck the earth with such force that his massive corpse was embedded in the ground.

For a century the carcass was picked clean by sages and scavengers. It is said that most mortal knowledge of draconic physiology came from this carrion plunder.

Once the dragon's corpse was removed, the remaining imprint became known as Dragon Trench, and has thereafter been used as a route for travelers to quickly navigate the Lost Forest (which is otherwise dense with undergrowth).

The woods here are rife with strange and ancient magic. Fairy folk flit between the trees. A sinister wasp cult holds cruel masses near the forest's heart. Timberwives hunt for heads under the moon and fill the night with the echoes of their foul ecstasies. Thundercloud Druids play the wind and seek meteoric crystals.

RUMORS (d6)

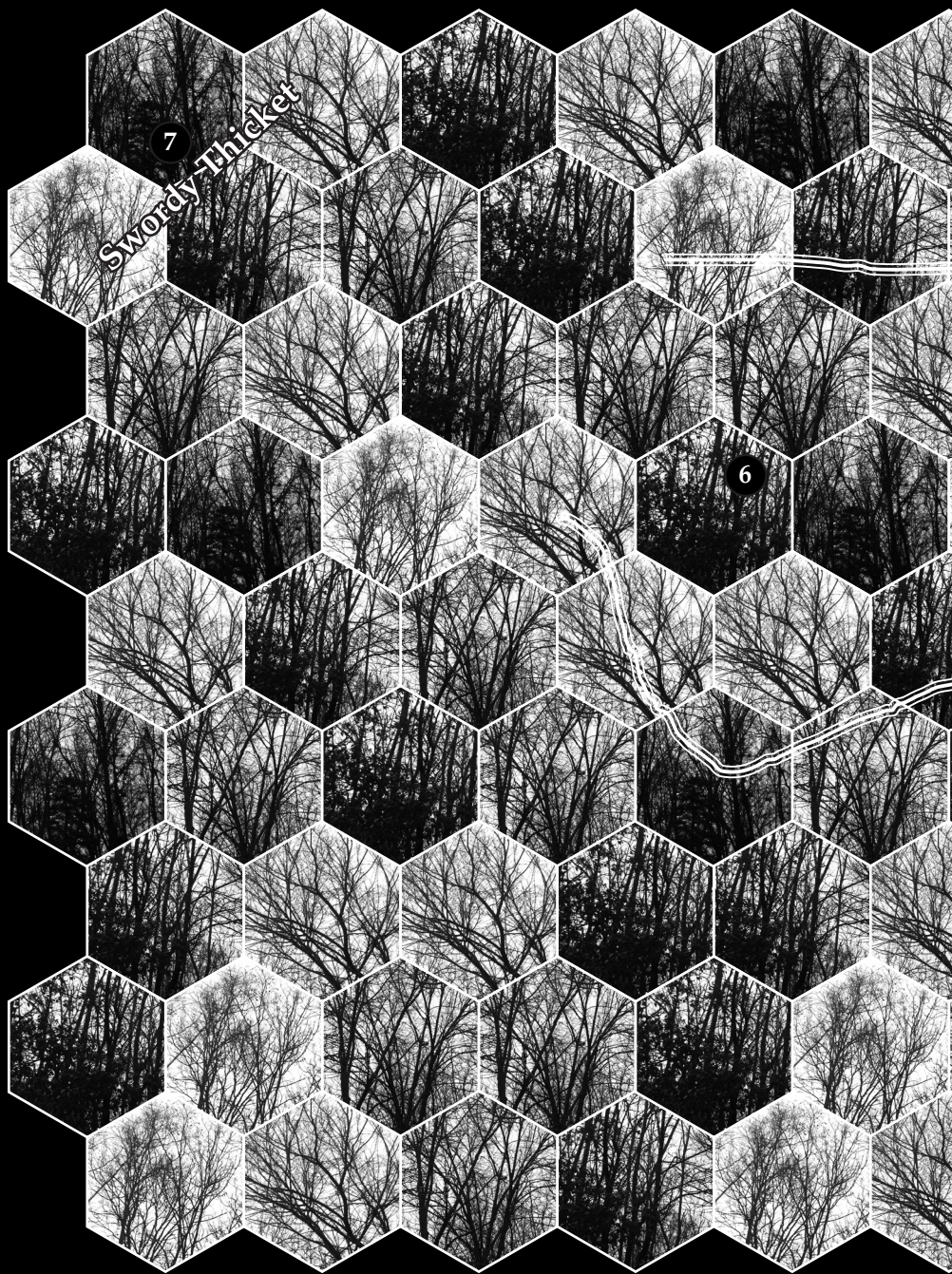
1. Turning your clothes inside out renders you immune to fairy magic. [T]
2. The Swordy Thicket is the site of an ancient battle against Orcs from the north. [T]
3. There's a magical sword at the bottom of Boyd Pond. [T]
4. The trench is the quickest path through the woods. [T]
5. The Crystal Crater is guarded over by Thundercloud Druids. [T]
6. Timberwives can turn invisible as long as they're in the woods. [F]

THE "REAL" PLACE

There is a place in the real world known (to me and a handful of childhood friends) as Dragon Trench. It's in Knob Noster, Missouri where I grew up, adjacent to the northeast stretch of Knob Noster State Park. It's a patch of woods divided by an old dry creek bed (the "trench"), thick with deer, rabbits, squirrels and a great many thorny places and stinging insects. We spent many hours exploring the place, even going so far as to map the trench and construct various landmarks for ourselves. Most of the details that follow in this issue are based, at least in part, on some aspect of the real place or the mythology that my friends and I concocted about it. The photos in this issue are also from the actual forest.



DRAGON

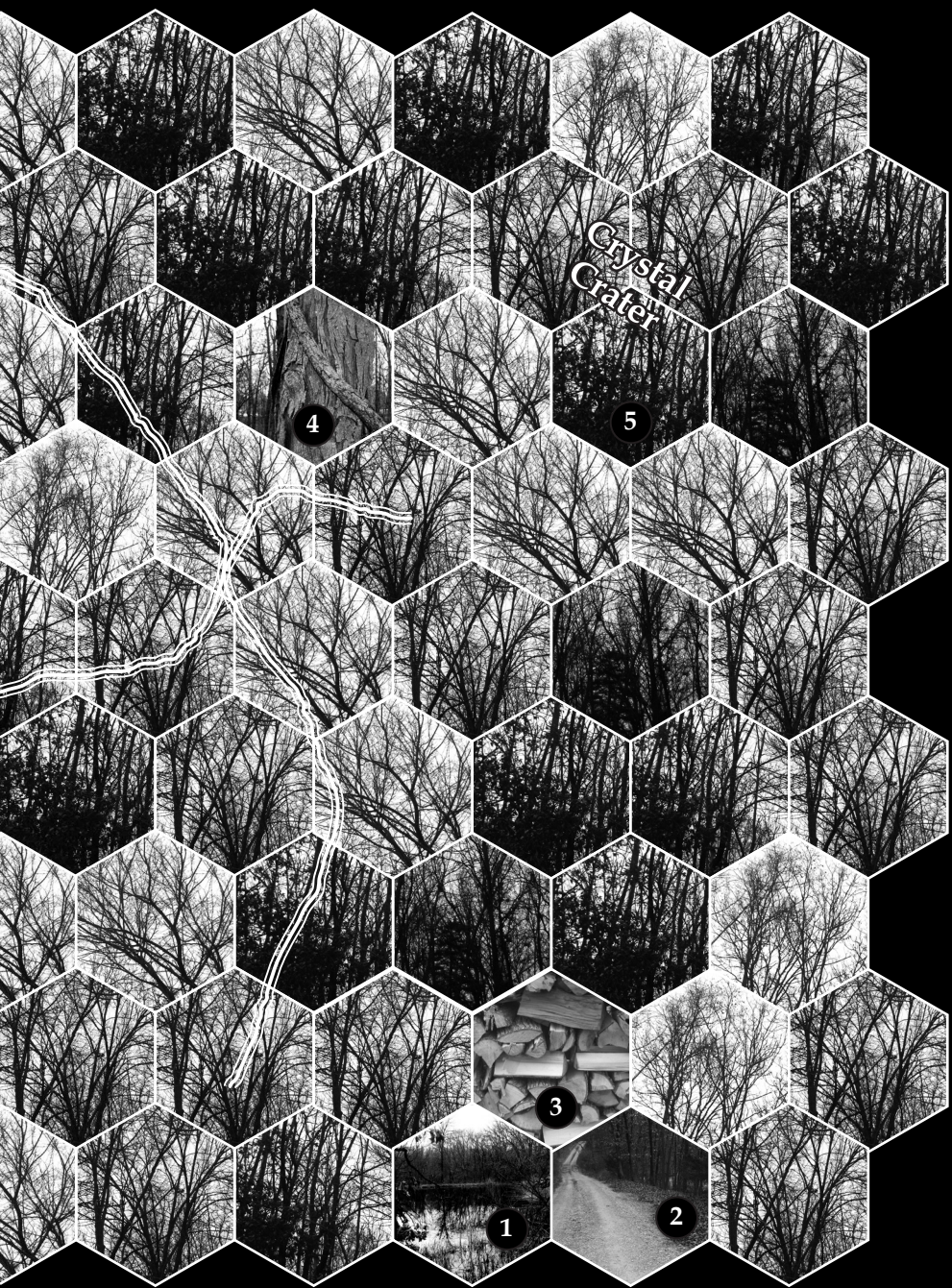


7

Swordy Thicket

6

TRENCH & THE LOST FOREST



CRAWLING THE TRENCH

Each hex on the map represents 5 miles (roughly 1 hour on foot). Each time the party enters a new hex, roll d% and consult the encounter table below (if the result is marked with a +, roll again). In addition, the PCs automatically encounter the numbered entries.

ENCOUNTER TABLE (d%)

- 01-40: No Encounter
- 41-45: Rain/snow +
- 46-50: Thunderstorm/blizzard +
- 51-55: Swarm of Wasps
- 56-60: 2d6 Nettle Goblins
- 61-65: 2d6 Fairies
- 66-70: 2d6 Thundercloud Druids
- 71-80: 2d6 Deer
- 81-86: 1d6 uses/Green Thistle+
- 87-88: 1d6 uses/Coffin Grass+
- 89-90: 1d6 uses/Wormrose+
- 91-95: 2d6 Dragon Clan Knights
- 96: 2d6 Timberwives
- 97: The "Lost Boys" (see pg 10)
- 98: Some kind of ghost
- 99: 1d6 Crystal Shards (see pg 8)+
- 00: Orb of Fairy Amber (VRA#1)+

THE TRENCH ITSELF

The triple white lines on the map represent the trench for which the area is named. Imagine it like a 6-10' deep creek bed. Traveling inside the trench allows the party to move 2 hexes per hour unless it is raining (the trench gets extremely muddy when wet).

BESTIARY

DRAGON CLAN KNIGHT

Defender of these lands.

Armor 19 (plate+shield), Move 90', HD3, HP 12, Sword/Mace/Hammer 1d8 damage or Longbow 1d6 damage, Morale 10

FAIRY

Mischievous, winged creature. Inhuman logic.

Armor 22, Move 240' flying, HD1, HP2, Bite 1d4 damage, Morale 8. Strange magic (weird effects made up by referee), characters with inside-out clothing are immune.

NETTLE GOBLIN

Thorn-covered servants of The Sting.

Armor 13*, Move 120', HD1, HP3, Spear 1d6 damage, Morale 4. *Successful melee attackers suffer 1 damage from thorny skin.

SWARM OF WASPS

Frenzied children of The Sting.

Armor 12, Move 120' flying, HD5, HP30, Each round the swarm attacks, characters in the area must *Save vs. Breath Weapon* or suffer 1d4 damage, Morale 12

THUNDERCLOUD DRUID

Woodwise tribal warrior.

Armor 14, HD 3, HP 12, Move 120', Thundercaster d10 damage (ignore 3 AC) or Flintknife d6 damage, Morale 10

TIMBERWIFE

Mud covered, tree-fucking berserker woman.

Armor 12, Move 140', HD5, HP15, Flintcleaver 1d10 damage, Morale 12

PLANTS

COFFIN GRASS

This long white grass grows in places where a corpse lies without proper burial. *If burned, it repels undead creatures.*

GREEN THISTLE

The rigid spines of this thistle can be poked into flesh like a hypodermic needle. Acts as a minor anesthetic. *Use to recover 1d4 HP.*

WORMROSE

This brownish rose is often burned as incense as an aid in ritual magic. When inhaled it weakens the barrier between imagination and reality. *If burned when a spell is cast, that spell is not lost for the day.*

MAP KEY

1. Boyd Pond

A large, murky pond. There's a 40% chance that **Turner Boyd** will be standing out on the surface of the water spearfishing. He wears *Boots of Waterwalking* and has 132sp in his belt pouch. Boyd lives in a rustic shack nearby. At the bottom of the pond is a magic sword, **Thorandrus**.

TURNER BOYD Armor 14, Move 120', HD2, HP6, Spear 1d8 damage, Morale 7

Thorandrus

Thorandrus is a sentient, loud-mouthed +3 longsword. It thinks very highly of itself and is annoying about expressing this belief. Its previous owner, Dame Zora of the Dragon Clan, cast the sword into the pond after it chastised her battle prowess.

2. The Old Road

This winding gravel path connects Fort Whitewind to Koster's Nob, a Hafling settlement to the south.

3. Fort Whitewind

This old stone fort was built long ago to shield the lands to the south from incursion by Orcs. Now it serves as the headquarters of the Dragon Clan. See page 9.

4. Father Sycamore

This massive sycamore is the most sacred site of the Timberwives (pg 11) who spend their monthly sabbats in moaning copulation with its ancient roots. Hundreds of severed heads dangle from its

branches. The tree is inhabited by a nature spirit gone mad. 4d6 **Timberwives** will be nearby the tree at any given time.

5. The Crystal Crater

Long ago a crystalline meteor smashed into the ground here, exploding into tens of thousands of **crystal shards**, many of which remain clearly jutting out of the ground throughout the crater. These crystals are coveted by many factions, but most closely controlled by the Thundercloud Druids who harvest them for use in their thundercasters. The crater is surrounded by woods and at any given moment, 2d6 **Thundercloud Druids** watch over the site from the treeline, ready to defend their extraterrestrial salvage operation from greedy outsiders.

Crystal Shards

A successful search roll (1 hour) in this area will uncover 1d3 crystal shards. Each shard is worth 50sp and can be ground into 20 charges of gunpowder.

6. Temple of the Sting

This is the Sting's grand vespiary, a hidden amphitheater in the thickest, gnarliest part of the forest. It is covered in detail on pages 14-18.

7. Swordy Thicket

This patch of forest is littered with hundreds of rusty, ancient swords sticking out of the ground and the trees. Explorers have a 1% chance of finding a magic sword.

KNIGHTS OF THE DRAGON CLAN

The Dragon Clan is a long-standing order of knights assembled by King Halvor II to provide protection for the scholars, merchants, and sages who studied and plundered the corpse of the dragon Redwrath on behalf of the crown.

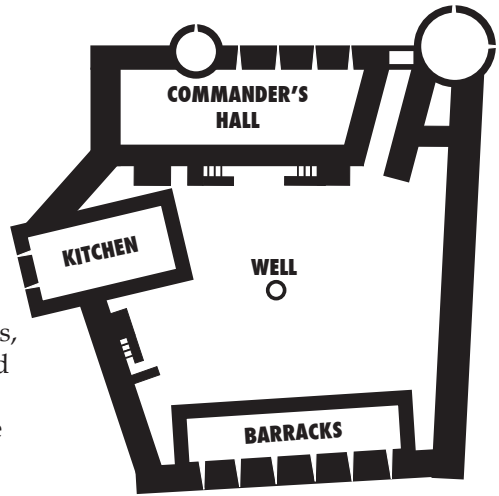
The order proved their valor when they defeated a legion of invading Orcs at the Battle of Bloody Leaves, in the area of the forest now known as Swordy Thicket.

The Dragon Clan is now a legacy organization of sorts. Their official responsibilities are few, but they still patrol the Lost Forest, protecting the surrounding lands from the minions of the Sting



Emblem of the Dragon Clan

FORT WHITEWIND



NEW SKILL: FALCONRY

Base skill is 0 (generally only available to Specialists). Your skill level in Falconry serves as the Attack Bonus for your falcon companion (who can attack independently from you). It can also be rolled to determine whether your companion successfully performs various falcon-appropriate tasks for you.

Trained falcons cost 200sp.

FALCON Armor 16, HD 1, HP 2, Move 160' flying, Talons 1d3 damage*, Morale 8

*Instead of inflicting damage, the falcon can distract its victim, causing a -1 penalty to the victim's next attack roll for each point of damage it would have caused.

Thanks to Mick Reddick and Reese Carter for helping develop this idea on Google+.

PROMINENT KNIGHTS

Sir Baldric

A dashing knight and expert falconer. Has unrequited feelings for Dame Eringlen.

Armor 19, HD 4, HP 16, Move 90', Long Sword 1d8 damage or Long Bow 1d6 damage + Falcon Strike 1d3 damage, Morale 10.

Dame Eringlen

Renowned boar hunter. Has unrequited feelings for Dame Zora.

Armor 19, HD 4, HP 16, Move 90', Boar Lance 1d10 damage or Long Bow 1d6 damage, Morale 10.

Sir Qualar

Veteran of many wars. Quartermaster of Fort Whitewind. Strategy game enthusiast.

Armor 19, HD 6, HP 16, Move 90', Long Sword 1d8 damage or Long Bow 1d6 damage, Morale 10.

Dame Zora

Dragon Clan shieldbearer. She carries nothing into battle but the Shield of Reprisal.

Armor 20, HD 4, HP 16, Move 90', No weapons, Morale 10.

Shield of Reprisal: +2 Shield.

When a melee attack against the bearer of this shield fails, the attacker suffers damage equal to that they would have caused with a successful hit.



THE LOST BOYS

Three adolescent Dragon Clan squires, known affectionately as “the lost boys,” can often be found getting themselves into trouble in the forest. They serve as the eyes and ears of the Dragon Clan.

LOST BOY Armor 12, HD 2, HP 6, Move 120', Shortsword 1d6 damage or Shortbow 1d6 damage, Morale 7.



Seamus

William

Darbie

THE THUNDERCLOUD DRUIDS

Some say the Thundercloud Druids are the descendants of the first folk, that their wisdom was taught by the Elves. The Druids maintain that the first of their kind emerged when Father Thundercloud struck a great oak with his lightning spear. Whatever their origin, the Thundercloud Druids have become a prominent faction within the Lost Forest. They thrive on trade with factions outside the forest. They are the Ghoulish Market's primary source of fairy amber (see VRA#1) and they trade with the Knights of the Dragon Clan for iron, sugar, and other supplies. They also created the world's first firearms.

Long ago a great crystalline meteorite slammed into in the northeast part of the Lost Forest. It exploded on impact showering its crater and the surrounding woodlands with crystal shards. These shards contain a magical quintessence of unknown origin. The crater was discovered by the Thundercloud Druids. From Father Thundercloud, the druids learned the wisdom of flint, crystal, and fire, developing the world's first firearm: the thundercaster. They learned that the crystal shards could be ground to an explosive powder, which could be touched off by the sparks produced by a flint shard striking metal.

THE THUNDERCASTER

The thundercaster is, essentially, a large bore flintlock musket. It fires hand carved stone balls, each carefully crafted and inscribed with spells of the hunt. Each Thundercloud warrior is expected to fashion their own caster and ammunition as a rite of passage.

Thundercaster: 1d10 Damage, 50' / 100' / 200', 5 rnds to reload, ignore 3 points of Armor, 1 in 10 chance of misfire. 160sp.



THUNDERCLOUD FLUTE MAGIC

Father Thundercloud bestowed many gifts upon his chosen people. Aside from the wisdom of flint and fire, he taught the druids the language of his sister, the wind. Over time they've developed a system to channel this language through a variety of sacred flutes.

Clay Flutes contain 1 random Level 1 Cleric spell. Costs 2000sp in the Ghoul Market.

Reed Flutes contain 3 random Level 1 Cleric spells. Costs 4000sp in the Ghoul Market.

Wood Flutes contain 5 random Level 1 Cleric spells. Costs 8000sp in the Ghoul Market.

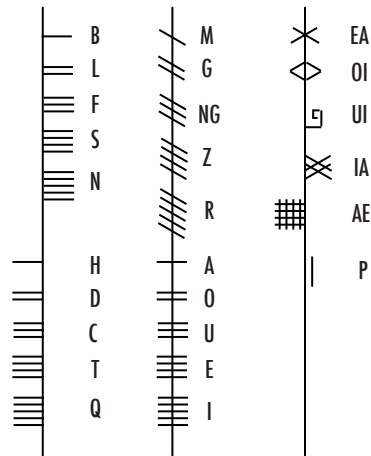
Play Wind is a skill that can be added to any character who needs it. The base score is equal to the character's Wisdom modifier (minimum 0). As usual for *LotFP* only specialists can increase this skill beyond its starting point unless a special circumstance arises.

To cast a spell contained within a flute, the caster must succeed at a *Play Wind* roll. If successful, the spell is cast as usual (only one spell per flute can be active at a time).

If the roll fails, the spell fizzles and the flute loses potency until it once again "catches the wind" by being placed in a tree bough or similarly high place for a whole day.

OGHAM

The written language of the Thundercloud Druids is known as "Ogham," which loosely translates to "lightning words." Ogham inscriptions are written vertically and read top to bottom. They are commonly found upon the weapons and equipment carried by the Druids. The script usually carries spells and blessings related to the object's intended use.

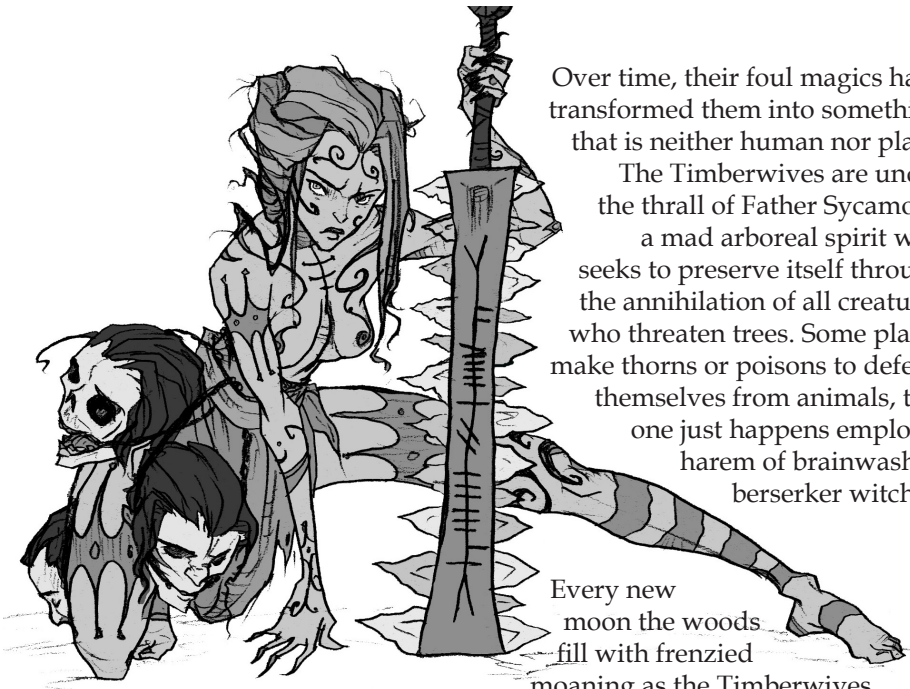


THUNDERCLOUD PCS

Thundercloud Druids make suitable player-characters of any standard human class (though Thundercloud Magic Users are probably outcasts of the tribe).

A Thundercloud character can choose to start with the following equipment instead of rolling for starting money:

- Clay Flute OR Thundercaster
- 10 Castershot & Powder
- Flintknife (Minor Weapon)



Over time, their foul magics have transformed them into something that is neither human nor plant.

The Timberwives are under the thrall of Father Sycamore, a mad arboreal spirit who seeks to preserve itself through the annihilation of all creatures who threaten trees. Some plants make thorns or poisons to defend themselves from animals, this one just happens employ a harem of brainwashed berserker witches.

Every new moon the woods fill with frenzied moaning as the Timberwives take Father Sycamore's roots into themselves and receive his pollen. After a week-long gestation they expel seedlings into the ground amidst the tree's twisted roots. These seedlings gradually develop into full-grown, adult Timberwives.

TALES OF THE TIMBERWIVES

"They came from the woods, clad in dried mud, jagged oghams, and dripping trophies. They leapt into our ranks in a frenzied blur. Knights fell screaming, unable to strike back. They ran with devilish speed, vaulted high, and took heads at their leisure. I'd heard stories of these women from the woods, but to see them . . . to see them was to witness death manifest."

- Dame Eringlen, Knight of the Dragon Clan.

Thundercloud legends tell us the Timberwives were a coven of women exiled and shunned by the tribe for practicing witchcraft.

The Timberwives hunt in nocturnal packs. They strike without fear or mercy, collecting trophy heads with which to adorn Father Sycamore upon their return from the hunt. Before each hunt they cover themselves in mud (for camouflage) and Ogham script (to invoke vorpal blessings). They move with inhuman speed, wielding massive cleavers lined with shards of razor-sharp flint.

TIMBERWIVES Armor 14, Move 180', HD5, HP15, Flintcleaver 1d10 damage, Morale 11

THE GRAND VESPIARY

One day when I was out tromping the woods with the Lost Boys we were ambushed by dozens of wasps. It was horrible. They got under our shirts, they stung the shit out of us. We ran screaming from the forest. This traumatic incident prompted the mythology of The Sting, lord of all stinging creatures. The Sting thereby became the default villain for the stories we made up about the woods we loved.

FATHER OF THORNS

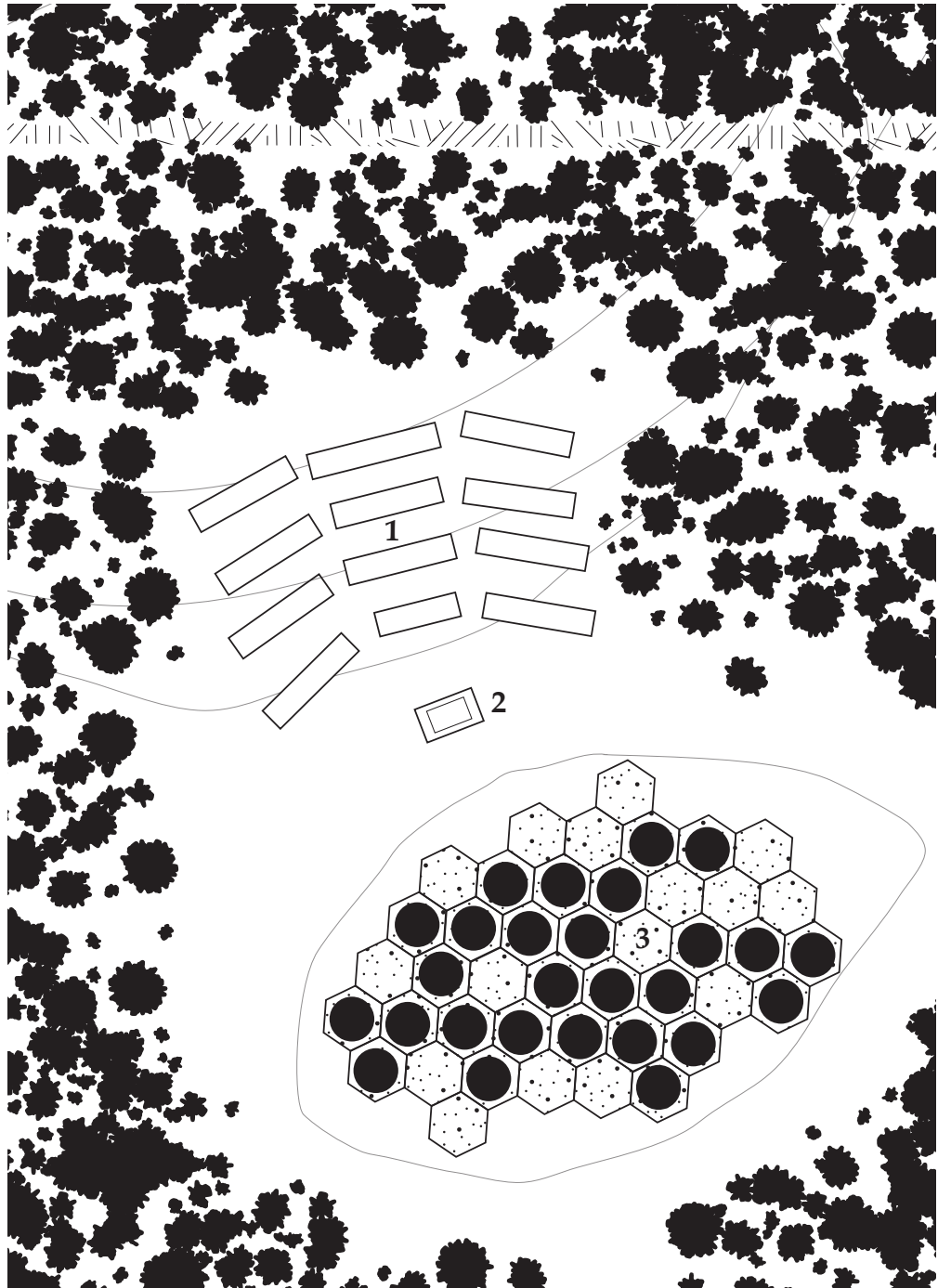
The Sting is a powerful demon. He is the father of stinging pests and thorny plants, the patron of creatures who revel in the misery of others. Shrines to The Sting are commonly uncovered in Orcish warrens and Goblin-haunted caves. Worship of The Sting provides supplicants with powerful boons, causing thorny protrusions to burst from their flesh, wasp-like wings to emerge from their backs, or tufts of stinging nettles to replace their body hair.

THE STING Armor 18, Move 120' (flying), HD9, HP54, Barbed Spear 1d10+5 damage + save vs poison or suffer 1d10 additional poison damage, can summon a swarm of wasps 3 times per day, casts spells as a level 5 magic-user, Morale 12

IN MY GAME

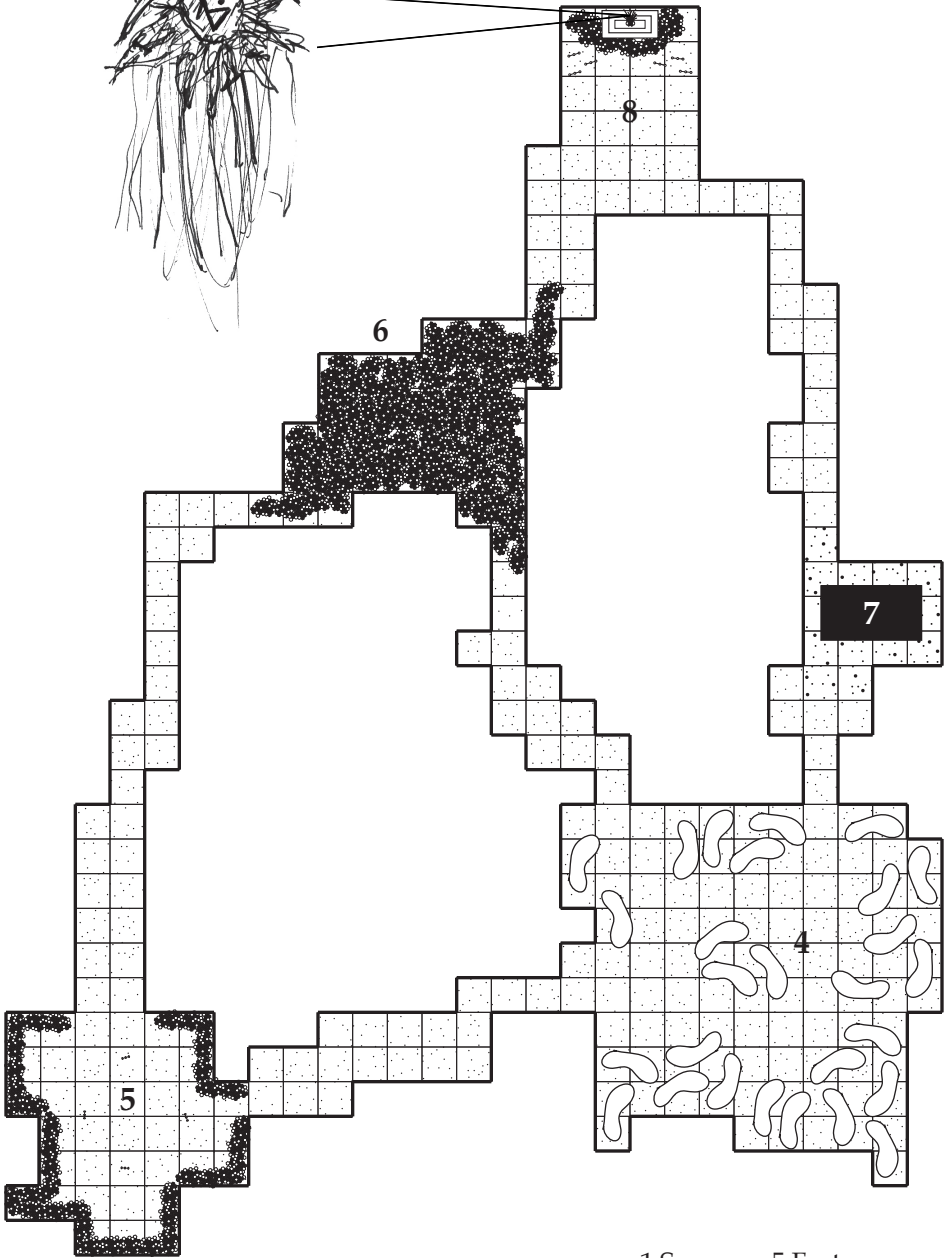
The following dungeon was originally created as the focal point for a one-shot session at a charity gaming event in the winter of 2014. I believe that game had 3 players and they managed to overcome the challenges herein through the clever use of smoke bombs and a very lucky casting of the *Summon* spell (although 2 of the 3 were killed in the process). Any number of different hooks could be used to bring the PCs into the scenario. In my game, Vespero the Antiquarian (from VRA#1) hired the PCs to recover the Mask of the Sting from the temple (at the secret behest of a rival Sting cult elsewhere in the forest). I would expect that this scenario would prove very deadly to low-level characters who attempt a frontal assault on the Sting cult.





The Vespiary

THE INNER SANCTUM



1 Square = 5 Feet

MAP KEY

1. Ampitheater

Rough stone blocks have been arranged here to serve as a crude amphitheater for the Sting's worshippers. 1d6-3 **Acolytes** will be skulking around here at any given time. At night, there is a 30% chance that 5d6 **Acolytes** and a **Wasp Cleric** will be performing a "cruel mass."

ACOLYTE Armor 12, Move 120', HD1, HP3, Dagger 1d4 damage, Morale 8

WASP CLERIC Armor 12, Move 120', HD3, HP9, Dagger 1d4 damage, Morale 10

Spells Prepared: Bless x1, Cause Light Wounds x1, Command x1

2. Mud Altar

By day, this is a crude earthen altar. During a cruel mass the altar will be draped with a drugged, helpless prisoner of the cult, whose bloated belly resembles a vespiary (wasp nest) sculpted from his or her flesh. Disturbing the victim in any way will cause a **Swarm of Wasps** to pour forth.

SWARM OF WASPS Armor 12, Move 120' flying, HD5, HP30, Each round the swarm attacks, characters in the area must Save vs. Breath Weapon or suffer 1d4 damage, Morale 12

3. The Grand Vespiary

This is the high temple of the Sting. His larval giant wasp avatars are bred and initiated within. The vespiary is composed of thick paper (essentially like very sturdy cardboard). 1d3 **Giant Wasps** guard the exterior at all times. Each covered cell in the structure contains a giant wasp larva. The cells with holes (black circles) contain narrow paper shafts which drop thirty feet into the larva chamber below (area 4).

GIANT WASP Armor 14, Move 120', HD5, HP15, Stinger 1d6 damage + save vs poison or suffer 1d6 additional damage, Morale 10

4. Larva Chamber

This large chamber is composed of earth tunneled out by giant wasps. The holes in the vespiary above permit shafts of day/moonlight. Giant wasp larvae are scattered across the floor, wriggling subtly.

5. Initiation Chamber

The walls of this earthen chamber are lined with hundreds of vespiaries, each bustling with wasps. Two **Swollen Acolytes** stand atop wooden pillars near the center of the chamber. They are naked, completely covered in wasps, silently enduring thousands of stings in a state of venom-induced oblivion. A **Wasp Cleric** presides over the scene, chanting with an inhuman buzzing. If disturbed from their sacred state, the acolytes will attack.

SWOLLEN ACOLYTE Armor 12, Move 120', HD2, HP6, can summon a Swarm of Wasps once per day, Morale 12

WASP CLERIC Armor 12, Move 120', HD3, HP9, Dagger 1d4 damage, Morale 10

Spells Prepared: Bless x1, Cause Light Wounds x1, Command x1

6. Atonement Chamber

Here is a small earthen chamber, floor, ceiling, and walls entirely covered with wasp nests. Touching the nests in any way will release a **Swarm of Wasps**.

SWARM OF WASPS Armor 12, Move 120' flying, HD5, HP30, Each round the swarm attacks, characters in the area must Save vs. Breath Weapon or suffer 1d4 damage, Morale 12

7. Refuse Pit

This muddy pit descends fifteen feet into the earth. It is littered with human and halfling bones and the still rotting **body of Ter the Barbarian**.

The Body of Ter the Barbarian

This wandering barbarian hero was an arch enemy of the Sting cult, but was recently killed during an ambush by Nettle Goblins. His body is clad only in a loin cloth and a pair of fine Elven boots (+2 Stealth). His rotting left hand still clutches a **disk**.

Ter's Disk

A +2 chakram (+5 vs. wasps and Sting-affiliated creatures). On a successful hit, it inflicts 1d6 damage then automatically attacks another target within 10' of the original target. It will continue to attack until it misses or until there are no valid targets, at which point it will return to the wielder's hand. The disk is worth 6000sp in the Ghoul Market.

8. Sting Shrine

Six crude candelabras illuminate this small chamber in an amber glow. An earthen altar sits against the north wall. Upon the altar is a **strange mask** composed of mud, dried nettles, and body parts from giant wasps. An angular sigil is painted in white across its brow.

The Strange Mask

This is the Mask of the Sting. Created to be worn by a mortal avatar who will wander the world as the herald of the Sting. The mask is worth 6,000sp on the ghoul market. When worn, the wearer transforms into a **Giant Wasp** (use the stats provided on the previous page).

The wearer must attempt a save vs magic to remove the mask. Failure means the mask cannot be removed until the wearer's death. Success means the mask is removed and the wearer reverts to their normal form.

RICK'S MOVING CASTLE

During the same adolescent years that I was running through the woods playing in Dragon Trench, I spent a lot of my computer time glued to *Castle of the Winds 2*, a simple Roguelike developed by Rick Saada. I always thought the game was pretty obscure, but I found a bunch of peers on Google Plus who shared a fondness for it. Thanks to my buddy Brendan, I managed to track down Rick and get a retrospective glimpse at his deadly castle.

CK: What's your earliest memory related to *Castle of the Winds*?

RS: I originally started work on *Castle* as a way to learn Windows programming. I was working on MS Word for DOS in the late 80's, but I could see that Windows was going to be the future. If I wanted to move forward, I was going to have to learn it. Naturally, when learning a new system, the first thing I decided to do was write a game. Having played far too much *Rogue*, *Hack*, *Larn*, *Omega*, and various other Roguelikes, I decided to write one of my own for Windows. This was, of course, a far larger undertaking than I originally expected. But the first time I got a player moving around

in a randomly generated dungeon was a great moment.

CK: What was your experience with *D&D* and other tabletop rpgs? Was *CotW* influenced by your own gaming?

RS: Oh, definitely. I started playing *D&D* in the mid 70's and haven't really stopped. I'd tried lots of systems over the years, but *D&D* was certainly the biggest influence on *CoTW*. I started with a lot of *D&D* type mechanics and then adapted them to work better with a computer game. For example, there's a rough alternation of turns where you go and then monsters go, which is like combat rounds in *D&D*. But in *CotW*, there's a time counter for each actor. When you take an action, it bumps your counter ahead by the time your action takes. That may be increased or decreased by speed effects. Then monsters all get to go until all of their time counters pass yours. Then you get to go again. If you're fast enough, you'll occasionally get to go twice before a monster does, because you're moving so much faster. *D&D*, without having a computer to keep track of this kind of bookkeeping, is much more granular.

The storyline for *CoTW* was partially adapted from a *D&D* campaign I'd put together. Of course I ended up scrapping a lot of it as I started doing randomly generated levels and pulling in Norse myths, but that's where I

started. I had fun pulling names for NPC's out of the Norse sagas and working on giving the game a bit more story than a typical Roguelike.

CK: Can you describe the development process for *CotW*?

RS: In a word, messy. You have to understand, I started writing this game in C and assembler on a 286 with a 10Meg hard drive. C++ wasn't around yet. I was backing up my source code every few days onto 5.25" floppies. Source control? Well I could pull out last week's floppy if I needed to revert. But since I was coding solo it was generally OK. I was editing with the Brief editor in character mode, and debugging using either a serial terminal or a secondary monochrome monitor. But at least I had a decent debugger, since Microsoft was making good tools even back then. I think I was using Codeview at the start. Charles Petzold's book, *Programming Windows*, was pretty much the guide for how to make Windows work, that and the API ref were all the documentation I had to work with. Since this was an evenings and weekends kind of project, I'd just pick a section to work on and do it. I'd say to myself "I think this weekend I'll add magic items." Then I'd figure out some data structures and off I'd go. I wanted to generate random items, so I set up what where effectively derived classes without the help of C++. I'd have an "Object" struct, and the first

byte would be an "ObjectType", which would be used to drive a switch. Then I could cast the object pointer to a "Potion" or a "Sword" struct which had additional fields. Hanging off the end would be a variable sized array of "attributes" that would do things when the object was used. So you could have a sword that did nothing, or bumped your chance to hit, or damage, or both, or had a bonus against certain monster types, etc. I could just randomly add as many attributes as I wanted to make cool stuff. There was a lot of seat of the pants programming, which of course resulted in lots of rewriting when some later cool idea didn't fit what I'd designed before. I was young.

CK: Did you always plan to publish/release the game or did that come later?

RS: That came much later. Windows 2 wasn't really a market when I started work on *Castle*. But by the time I had a game someone might want to play, Windows 3.0 had shipped, with 16 and even 256 color support! I got to use palette animation! And protect mode! The transition of PCs to a Windowing environment started in earnest, and that put *Castle* in a good position. The other thing that happened along the way was that ID made sequelware a reasonable business model. Rather than ship and pray someone sent you money, or shipping crippleware, you could ship a complete game and sell the sequels.

Having played through all the *Commander Keen* games, and then watching *Wolfenstein* explode on the scene, I realized I could make a two part game and have a decent shot at getting some registrations.

CK: Did that work? How did the game do commercially? (I'm pretty sure I got my copy at Wal-Mart around 1995, which implies some pretty wide circulation).

RS: Most of the distribution was handled by Epic Megagames, back when it was just Tim Sweeney uploading to BBSs himself. I figured out that I wasn't going to have time to do all the disk duping and mailing on my own, so I signed on with him. I've still got my *Jill of the Jungle* disks around somewhere, which was his game at the time. It turned out to be a great decision for me, because while I only got a piece of the pie, instead of all of it, it was a much larger pie. I ended up getting something like 12,000 or so registrations over the course of a few years, which was pretty good for that period. Not *Doom* numbers, but nothing to sneeze at. The Wal-Mart deal was our only boxed presence, I still have a copy on my shelf! I'm not sure how much revenue it pulled in, but it was fun to be able to give my parents a copy.

CK: You mentioned you're still into *D&D* these days. What are your games like? Which edition(s) do you play with? Are you more of a DM or a player?

RS: My game group has tried a lot of rules over the years. Recently we've played *Pathfinder* (we didn't like *D&D* 4E), *Savage Worlds* in various versions, and *Numenera* (which we liked quite a bit). I ran the 5E starter campaign for the group, and I'm currently a player doing a dragon cult campaign. I enjoy both roles, so it's fun to switch it up. It depends on how much time I have to put into running the games. Even with a retail campaign there's quite a bit of prep work involved! When I have time though, I prefer to roll my own adventures so I can have fun writing the story. Of course players have a way of taking your plans off in directions you never considered...

CK: Are you familiar at all with the Old School Renaissance (OSR) movement in rpgs?

RS: I don't know much about them at all. I know people who still run *AD&D* rules for fun now and again, but that's about it.

CK: Thanks so much for the interview! It's been an honor.

You can find Rick-approved downloads of both *Castle of the Winds* games over yonder: <http://lkbm.ecritters.biz/cotw/download.html>



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