

# Sinister Things:

## Just doing the same old thing

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### Vhallan: The Nishendi

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The people known as the Nishendi live outside the power and social structures of Vhallan. They are insular roamers who are looked upon with suspicion and derision by most. The first Nishendi came to Vhallan from Salandra, though it is said that their original homeland is much further still. While they could be called Salandran, but they have maintained their own separate identity across the centuries.

It should be understood that except for the Hran noble families and the increasingly rare isolated Vhall village, most people in Vhallan are of mixed heritage. There is no dishonor to having Salandran blood, unless you want to marry a noble, but having Nishendi blood marks you as untrustworthy. Even possessing the classic dark hair and eyes and olive skin of the Nishendi is sometimes enough to start the accusations flying.

During the last great war with Salandra thirty years ago, the Nishendi were seen by most to be enemies of Vhallan and were often rounded up, persecuted, or even slaughtered outright. A caravan had no defense against even a squad of determined soldiers. That the Nishendi continue to travel back and forth across the mountains into Salandra has does nothing but sow more suspicion. The most common crimes attributed to Nishendi are poaching, thievery, and spying.

Nishendi are viewed as seducers and swindlers. The men take what they please from innocent maidens, leaving broken hearts and bastards in their wake. The women take advantage of weak men, using their guiles for the purposes of theft and/or extortion. Despite their reputation, many find themselves attracted to the mystery, danger, and exoticism of a Nishendi romance.

Nishendi are notorious for their disregard of land rights. Their reputation and squatters and thieves mostly comes from the nobles on whose land they trespass. The notion of protected hunting grounds are particularly ludicrous to the Nishendi and they demonstrate this by poaching. It is common for Nishendi to take from farmers' field without permission. Eventually, they will compensate the farmer, often by working the fields, though the payment may come in a later season. Communities that are frequented by Nishendi eventually come to a mutual understanding, but the closer one gets to urban areas and lands tightly controlled by nobles, the more tensions rise.

The Nishendi social and political structure follows family line, yet Nishendi families are bound by blood, not vows. There is no expectation of monogamy. It is common for men to father multiple children with different women and for women to bear the children of different men. Lifelong marriages are unheard of, though

lifelong, if intermittent, love affairs are common. Posturing among males is common and duels are frequent.

Nishendi children are raised almost exclusively by women until the onset of puberty. Traditionally, this means the mother and her family, including the child's aunts and grandparents, though sometimes a sister or mother of the father will raise the child. Which side of the family has the honor or burden to raise the child can be a very strong point of contention between the parents and their families.

At puberty, a boy's father or uncle will typically take the boy under his wing. If neither of these are available, a male from the mother's side of the family will step up to raise the boy to be a man. Girls are more likely to stay with the family who had raised them, though some do seek out the other side of family.

Nishendi men believe that all women are to be adored and revered, whether as lovers, mothers, or grandmothers. Their attitudes toward the weaker sex are romantic, condescending, and even hypocritical. Men should protect and provide for women, but men are not always around when they are needed. Strong bonds between fathers and daughters are rare.

There is an unwritten, traditional code of honor among the Nishendi. Crimes within the community are handled by the community—outsiders are not called into adjudicate or muster justice. Matters of honor and reputation are handled by duels. Typically, the one who draws first blood is entitled to an apology. If none is given, the duel continues, possibly even to death, until some form of contrition is made.

While some Nishendi have converted to the pre-dominant, Hran-based religion of the realm, most still follow their traditional ways. All supernatural powers are to be feared and given respectful distance. Gods are not to be trusted. Worship and sacrifices would only draw their attention, and if one must pray, one should pray that the powers not intervene. There are rituals and magics that can call upon the powers, but only the desperate or insane would think to do so.

The Nishendi believe that the universe is controlled by never-ended cycles and they find no better symbols of this than in the changing of the seasons and the phases of the two moon, Olash and Rinah. By observing the cycles and reading the signs, it is possible to predict the future.

Every man and woman has lived countless lives. The fortunes and tribulations of this life are a result of these lives. Past sins are visited upon us by present misfortune. The divination of past lives is one of the techniques of Nishendi fortune tellers, though outsiders may argue that such fanciful tales are only part of the confidence game which the fortune teller plays.

Nishendi magic is not unlike hedge magic from other traditions, but their insular and exotic nature makes it appear more mysterious and potent to outsiders. The Nishendi fortune tellers are renown for not only their uncanny accuracy, but also their ability to drain silver from their clients. The eight-sided moon dice are used not only for divination but also for games of chance. The hexes, talismans, and potions sold by Nishendi witches carry a hidden price and lead to unexpected complications.

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## Super System Omega

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The following should illustrate what I am trying to accomplish with SSΩ powers.

### Invisibility

The power to turn oneself invisible or undetectable by other means (such as sound or smell) is useful not only in combat, where you can gain surprise against an opponent, but also outside of combat, when you can look for clues, sneak into hideouts, and trail someone without being noticed.

The nature of your invisibility will greatly affect the manner in which you might be detected. You and the GM should carefully work out the implications and limitations of your power. If you bend visible light around your body, does it also affect the infrared or ultraviolet spectrum? What happens to radar signals or x-rays? Is there a visible fringe effect where the light bends and can be detected as a faint shimmer to someone who looks closely? In this example, you would still show up clearly on sonar (active and passive). You might also be able to justify immunity against light-based effects, such as lasers and blinding flashes while invisible. On the other hand, bending the light around you may render you effectively blind.

Invisibility can also work directly on the mind, rather than some physical interaction. You may be able to cloud people's minds so that they simply do not notice you or you alter their perceptions so that they see something innocuous (this might be related to an illusion power you have). These kinds of psychic-based invisibilities have their own advantages and disadvantages. For example, they might work against any senses, but they may not affect machines and not work through video monitors or radar screens. Refer to the guidelines on mental powers for more suggestions.

Normally, you can only be detected by those senses that your power does not affect. Bear in mind that most humans use vision and hearing and are unlikely to notice someone by other senses, such as smell. Characters with senses that are not blocked by the invisibility can notice the character normally. A Perception roll may be required, but it is compared against the target's Stealth (if sneaking) and not the rank in Invisibility.

Flawed or partial invisibility means you leave behind visual clues that can be detected with normal Perception against your rank in Invisibility. The GM should only allow someone a chance to notice you when appropriate and you should describe those cases when you define the power.

In most cases, psychic-based invisibility should be considered flawed, but use Willpower instead of Perception to notice your presence. Exactly how someone notices you depends on the basis of your power and is something that you and the GM can determine and describe together. Even if detected, invisibility can still give you a bonus to evade an attack equivalent to being in partial darkness, depending on how you were de-

tected. For example, a guard dog might smell your presence but is still at a penalty to attack you.

If you can never be detected, then the rank should be set at Beyond. See elsewhere for guidelines of Absolute and Beyond powers.

### Positive Aspects

Each type of detection thwarted counts as a positive aspect.

- + Sight: visible light, infrared, ultraviolet
- + Other wavelengths in electro-magnetic spectrum: radar, x-ray, etc.
- + Hearing
- + Smell & taste
- + Touch (ok, being invisible to touch is just weird, but its your game)
- + Active sonar
- + Mind scan

### Negative Aspects

- Your invisibility is flawed or partial and people are allowed to make normal Perception checks to notice you
- You must remain stationary or the power's effectiveness drops
- You cannot see (or perhaps hear or smell, etc.) while invisible
- You can be viewed indirectly in mirrors, and reflections, or video

### Circumventing Invisibility

Opponents have a number of classic and clever means of countering your invisibility. Blowing flour, spraying paint, or turning on the sprinklers in an area can render you detectable. These types of tricks are essentially attacks that you can evade or perhaps dive for cover, depending on how large the area is. Tracking footprints in wet cement, a dusty floor, or a lawn is also effective unless you can fly, brachiate, or jump over the area. Placing obstacles in the way, even if as harmless as party balloons, or turning off the lights (thus making everyone effectively invisible) can also blunt the effectiveness of invisibility.

### Stealth or Invisibility

In the comics, having a very high Stealth skill is almost the same as having the power of invisibility. In SSΩ, this is also the case since both are opposed by Perception. However, there are differences to consider in how the Stealth and Invisibility are applied. Unless you take a specialty, Stealth applies to hiding and moving silently, but offers no protection against exotic forms of detection, such as active sonar or infrared. Invisibility can be used to stand directly in front of someone and not be noticed, but Stealth is good for making a mysterious exit when someone's head is turned for but a moment. When portraying different characters with these abilities, the players and GM should illustrate these differences without undermining the importance or usefulness of either.

### Timelines

Authors of science fiction stories and games often create timelines that bridge the gap between the present of the author and the present of the setting. But I feel this is often a mistake. Rather than make the setting more accessible and believable, timelines can easily exceed the audience's threshold of disbelief. This is doubly-true for near-future settings, such as those featured in *Cyberpunk* and *Twilight 2000*, as their shelf-life is perilously short. If a timeline is necessarily to describe events in the setting's past, then it is best to not connect it to our present day.

Another option, one I am currently enamored with, is to create a retroactive timeline in Earth's history. Rather than plot the future, the retro-timeline changes the past. An obvious example is the game *Space 1889*, which supposes that space travel was created in Victorian times. The setting I currently have rattling around in my head supposes that aliens came to Earth around 1950 and after 50 years of accelerated technological development, humans become a starfaring race in 2000. But I doubt I can write a convincing and believable timeline for this alternate history

### Human Capacity

Contrary to popular myth, humans are already using 100% of our brains (just not all at once) and there is no evolutionary reason for people to get smarter. Humans have not evolved since they became smart enough to bypass natural selection with tools. I have no doubt that the future will bring better tools that will make us more efficient, and our overall knowledge of the universe will be greatly expanded, but unless we develop technology to change the way the brain is wired, I have little faith in humanity's ability to transcend the intellectual capacity it already has.

I like my future to be populated by average folks. They may have extraordinary ability within their specialties, but nothing that surpasses what we see today. Sure, there will be a few ungodly intelligent people out there, but these will be as common as they are today. The diversity and depth of ability displayed by the average Star Fleet officer, for example, greatly annoys me (though I concede that perhaps only the phenoms were shown on-screen). I find the crew of *Serenity* much more believable (and I would add that River probably has had per brain re-wired).

### The Big 360

I have just enough space here to congratulate Lee on reaching this milestone of 30 years. I have been part of this community for less than half that time, and all I can say is thank you. Thanks to Lee for doing what she does, giving A&E the stability and longevity none have ever matched. And thanks to all of you for being here and doing what you do, for A&E is nothing without its family of contributors and friends.

I realized in my last zine that I talked about cool but not about NPC classes/races as cool. Let me make a very simplistic connection, as it applies to D&D. Any cool class, race, feat, power, spell, etc. that was too powerful or unbalancing to be left in the hands of the players were restricted to NPCs. The Anti-paladin class and Drow race from AD&D are perfect examples of this effect. They were not cool because they are NPC-only; rather, they were NPC-only because they are cool (i.e., powerful). In the latest edition of D&D, system improvements make them more viable as PC options, but I really think it comes down to the game designers giving players what they want.

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### Comments: Issue #358

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#### Myles Corcoran

I agree with you that superhero roleplaying requires players and GMs to have the right mindset. Sometimes good mechanics can help, but they can also do more harm than good. I want players playing their heroes, not playing the mechanics. I also think this applies to any genre, especially those with a more cinematic nature.

I have no confidence in my ability to pick reasonable-sounding numbers for the cost or weight of equipment. In fact, I have no confidence in my ability to create any element of the background such that it sounds reasonable. There are simply too many people, especially in these pages, more knowledgeable than I.

#### Lee Gold

Since China pegs their yuan to the U.S. dollar, having a low dollar brings no relief to our trade deficit with China. Many believe the yuan is undervalued due to this pegging and call for China to float the yuan on the currency market. China, of course, has no incentive to do this and is reluctant to introduce market instability into their currency. As you said, the effects are very complex.

When you said "*roleplaying* the underlying laws of chemistry" I thought you meant it in the same way the GM might *roleplay* Ares or Thor. I read, "giving the natural forces a *personality*," and thought you meant *personifying* the Law of Gravitation so that the PCs could talk with it. A verb we might agree on might be *describe*, *detail*, or *explain*, especially in such a way that it has a flavor and texture of its own rather than feeling generic and cold (unless generic and cold is desired, such as for hard science-fiction).

#### Spike Y Jones

Compromise (or lack of it) is used as a weapon by anyone with media access. Those who do not compromise are accused of playing "partisan politics" and those that do compromise are accused of flip-flopping, having no conviction, or selling out their principles and/or their constituents.

## Joshua Kronengold

I have no idea what the “obvious standard of exchange is” and do not know how to decide “how many hour of work something is worth.” I have never been good at guesstimating. See also my comment to Myles.

Some (if not most) gamers are very good at taking a power or ability and taking to its logical extreme to maximize its effectiveness. Taken too far, it breaks genre conventions. Taken not far enough, it breaks gaming conventions. Can TK be resisted? Are incorporeal heroes affected by gravity? Can images or emotions be communicated via telepathy? With SSΩ, my goal is to have the limits of powers defined by the players. To this end, I would like to compile a list of common and possible answers to these questions as a guide the players without providing a canonical and finite list.

## Louis LaMancusa

I think video games (for computer or consoles), especially so-called computer rpgs, are the primary culprit for the decline in face-to-face, tabletop gaming in today's youth. Video games are cooler, look better, do not require other people, take up less space, can be started and stopped at any time, and are more approachable to the mainstream than the weird rpgs that we play. And now that we have fully graphic MMORPGs like Everquest and City of Heroes to compete against, we cannot win.

## Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Is GURPS racist? Toon? Over the Edge? I think you pulled a bait-and-switch with your “Are RPG's Racist” article. You spent most of it talking about pulps of the 1930's and D&D-style fantasy. “Are Pulp or D&D Racist” would be been a more accurate title.

I too love underground places. A visit to Mammoth Cave was one of the highlights of my vacation last summer. D&D-style dungeons completely surpass my threshold of disbelief, however. When I recently ran an underground adventure for my campaign, I set it in an abandoned mine occupied by angry earth elementals. The ecology of kobolds is much easier when you treat them as spirits or fae than as a race of demi-humans.

## Lisa Padol

I really enjoyed Suffering and Tribulations.

## Paul Mason

I have agreed with your sentiments (political or gaming) more often than I have disagreed with them.

I sympathize with your lack of a playtest group and what that means to the game design. At least for hashing out game mechanics, perhaps a play-by-email game would at least get the ball rolling. I know, it is not the same thing by a long shot, but it is better than noticing.

## Jim Vassilakos

Jim, I am sorry my comments read like a personal attack on you. I never intended them that way.

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## Comments: Issue #359

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## Lee Gold

It seems to me that Vulcans would lead by appealing to logic, rather than emotions. A Vulcan leader does not inspire, but enlighten.

## Spike Y Jones

I think PDF downloads are an ideal way for publishers to unload “dead weight” from game books. But then, I consider character sheets to be dead weight.

## Joshua Kronengold

I am (very) right-handed, but I like the word and how it has the dual meaning you implied.

## Paul Mason

I will miss Fluxus.

My personal take on genre is that one must work both within and outside genre conventions, much as one must play in- and out-of-character. It is the balance of the two that separates the truly great from the simply mediocre (genre novel or roleplaying game).

## Brian Christopher Misiaszek

Back in 1992, I lamented about wanting something “completely different.” I was directed to OTE. Nowadays, you might be directed over the The Forge and “indy/indie” games. In many ways, the lack of innovation you see is simply a factor of lowest common denominator. Settings that appeal to the most gamers get the most support and those that do not become marginalized. If I liked Exalted or D&D, I would be happy, not bitter and disgruntled.

Personally, I do not mind pedestrian *worlds* so long as the *characters* are interesting. In fact, a setting that is too alien or too detailed can overshadow the importance of the characters. I feel this way about LotR.

Realize that roleplaying is simply *weird* and that even most SF/F fans do not play rpgs. At one time murder mystery party games were popular, I imagine by people who liked mysteries and puzzle-solving rather than roleplaying, but the fad faded.

## Simon Reeve

I like Verdana, though it is designed for on-screen, rather than printed, text.

Very good point about six degrees of separation. Just because you are three degrees from the Pope, that does not mean you can ring him up on the phone.

The title font is Hultog, by S. John Ross.  
<http://www222.pair.com/sjohn/fonts2.htm>