

Sinister Things CXIX

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Races of the Known World

There are six known races, and a seventh that is only rumored about. Every race can be found anywhere in the world, though the open seas and the world beneath the waves belong solely to the undine.

I am not at all happy with the names, since they all carry preconceptions, but I find them preferable to simply making up new names for the sake of having new names. For the elementals, I have fallen back on the nomenclature of Paracelsus. I am particularly unhappy with having two races beginning with "gn"

The information that follows is not symmetric: not all the same details are provided for each race because I have not figured out what I want exactly. These are just my first thoughts. The matter of procreation of the elemental races became fundamental to how I envisioned them, perhaps because I was going for something distinctly non-mammalian.

Together, the elemental races comprise roughly two-fifths of the population. Though there are geographical variances (especially the undine, who stay near large bodies of water and permanent springs and streams), their numbers are essentially equal. Shades, the mysterious "seventh race" are also elementals, but since their very existence cannot be positively confirmed, their numbers are obviously unknown.

Most races will openly mix in villages and cities, working alongside each other. Family lines and connections follow strict racial boundaries. Interbreeding is impossible, though rumors of half-breeds do occasionally surface. Copulation between humans and gnolls is possible and rarely practiced, but simply not applicable to elementals who do not truly copulate even within their own race.

Humans

Humans are the most populous of any single race, comprising at least two-fifths of the population. Their success can be attributed to their size and strength, which is greater, on average, to any other race, to their cunning and bloodthirsty nature, and to their very flexible and powerful magics.

Humans display superficial, regional differences in skin tone, hair color and texture, and facial features.

Gnolls

Gnolls are sometimes called beast men by humans since they have an appearance similar to a crossing of a man and a beast such as a wolf, cat, bear, or hyena, depending on the individual. Their ears and tails are similar to those of a wolf. Gnolls are a chaotic race with wild variation in color, size, and facial proportions. Offspring may not share any resemblance to their parents, though gnolls can identify their progeny by scent. While

an individual gnoll may be bigger and stronger than then the most impressive human, most are smaller, standing only four feet tall on average.

Their fur ranges from white to black, orange to brown, and can be a uniform shade or splotchy; many have a few spots or stripes on their torsos. Usually, the hair is short and coarse, though usually thicker on the back of the head, neck, and shoulders.

Their teeth and claws make formidable natural weapons, but they are no match to a dagger. Their sense of smell is very acute. Their hearing and eyesight, especially at night, is also superior to any other race.

Gnolls are strict carnivores, eating only meat and eschewing all fruits, grains, and vegetables except in times of illness or gastric discomfort. They do partake in alcoholic drinks, made from such things, but take no pleasure or notice of their taste.

Gnomes

Gnomes are born of the earth and are renown not only for their mining and metalworking skills, but also for their superior agricultural and brewing techniques. They are a stout, hearty race with a natural lifespan twice that of humans and the longest of any race. They have broad, expressive faces with nose, mouth, eyes, and ears that are oversized compared to humans. Their skin is dark and rough and their hair can easily sprout moss if not groomed regularly.

Unlike other elementals, gnome females do not lay eggs. Rather, when gnomes are ready to have a child, they create one. The female creates a mass of soil and clay the size and rough shape of a gnome child. The mass must be able to sustain plant life, so raw metal, coal, or lifeless stone is not appropriate. The male will then mold and carve the mass into a gnomish form and once this has been done to sufficient detail, the newly formed gnome will come alive. The process of creating a gnome child is long and laborious, giving them the slowest reproduction rate of all the races. If they attempt to make the child too large or too mature, the process will fail and the carving will never take on life.

Gnomes are strict vegetarians and will become ill if they consume flesh or blood.

Salamanders

Salamanders are lizard folk averaging around five feet in height, though their tails can easily add another fifty percent to their overall length. Their skin consists of minute scales that are similar to those of a snake or lizard. Coloring is typically bright, primary colors with spots and other patterns that vary by clan. Males have more pronounced crests than females. The claws on their fingers and toes greatly enhance their climbing ability. Contrary to rumor, they are not poisonous and their long, slender tongues are not forked.

Salamanders can generate a fiery nimbus about their bodies. The flames extend a few inches and glow with a light that is bright enough to read by. The color of the nimbus changes with mood and temperament. Its heat can equal that of a torch or be as gentle as sunlight, depending on their desires (and anger) of the individual. Also contrary to rumor, they cannot spit flame or use their nimbus to light fires at a distance.

During mating, the female lays a clutch of two to four eggs. The hard, speckled eggs will remain inert and lifeless until lit aflame by the nimbus of a male. The flame dies down after a few minutes. The parents then wait patiently, anywhere from a minute to a day, until the egg shell bursts into flame, lit by the nimbus of the life inside and the hatchling emerges.

Before hatching, the eggs are pale brown, speckled with flecks of color, based on clan. They are the size of two fists side-by-side. The hatchlings appear nearly identical to adults, except scaled down proportionately. Once hatched, they need little assistance from their parents and quickly learn how to hunt and forage on their own. Socialization and language are provided by the parents and the clan as a whole.

Depending on the culture, males must prove their worthiness to the female with gifts, elaborate rituals, or even lethal combat. Typically, the choosing of a father is done before the eggs are laid, but in some places, it is done once a clutch is formed.

Like humans, salamanders are omnivorous, but they find it difficult to digest grains and many fibrous vegetables that have not been thoroughly cooked.

Sylphs

Sylphs are the least hearty of the races, trading toughness for the ability to fly. They prefer the highest mountaintops and tend to avoid the low-lying plains, though several clans do inhabit the scattered islands of the Open Sea. Sylphs are also known

Female sylphs are larger than the males and are not as brightly colored. The sylph female lays a perfectly spherical, crystal egg that is more durable than the hardest steel. The mate hatches the egg by singing to it, and the resonances between the male and the hatchling shatter the egg. Sylph hatchlings are very vulnerable and fragile, more so than even human babies.

Sylph dietary requirements are similar to salamanders and there is conjecture that they are more closely related than any of the other elementals. What happens when a crystalline sylph egg is subjected to the nimbus of a salamander is unknown, but rumors of a sylph-salamander hybrid, called a firebird or phoenix, persist.

Undines

Undines can be found in both fresh and salt water and the transitional coastal regions where the two mix. During their lifetimes, undines may travel countless waterways of various types, but they always return to their home waters to breed. Thus, cross-breeding between fresh and salt water clans is impossible.

The female lays a mass of a dozen or more pearlescent, spherical eggs, each no larger than hen's egg, in the sand or gravel. Unlike fish eggs, these are hard as stones. The male must then come and secrete an clear, viscous liquid that coats the eggs and slowly dissolves the shells, freeing the hatchlings inside. As with salamanders, the undine hatchlings have a natural instinct for survival, but the parents do provide protection and teachings.

A brief history of DunDraCon, which includes a mention of A&E can be found at <http://www.dundracon.com/History.html>

When I walked out of the house in Friday to go the convention, it was raining. The nice weather we had been having turned chilly on the weekend, but the rain is welcome to what has otherwise has seemed a very dry winter.

Overall, the convention was very good for me. I played in four games, including three which were new to me, and the Call of Cthulhu game I ran went exceptionally well. The games I played reinvigorated me to resume work on SSΩ, specifically to just jump in and start play testing ideas.

Friday night, I played in a Mutants and Masterminds game based on the Marvel series Exiles centered on alt-reality characters bobbing around trying to fix ripples in the multi-verse. This was the first time the GM had run a game at a convention, and it showed. Despite the heavy-handedness of the adventure, I had a lot of fun playing my character, the daughter of Juggernaut who inherited many of her father's powers. Anytime the words "bitter" and "deathwish" are in a character I play, I am sure to have a good time. I also got to see the new 2nd edition M&M rules in action but they failed to impress upon me the need to purchase them.

The first game on Saturday was a first-contact science fiction game with an international team of specialists sent to intercept what turned out to be a generation ship, using the HeroQuest rules. We only used the extended contest rules once, but I was out of the room (and the scene) at the time, so I still do not have a feel for how they work. But the rest of the system seemed to work fine and I am tempted to pick up QuestWorlds when it is finally released.

Goblin City is a clever haiku of a setting, a one-page rpg that has a good heart. It can be downloaded from <http://www.wargolem.com/freebies/goblinecity.pdf> The second half of the six-hour adventure pitted our motley crew of vermin exterminators against a walking mage fortress slowly making its way to the city. Overall, it was a nifty mix of high-adventure and chaotic looniness, marred only by the first three hours of dull directionless chaos.

With the Goblin City game going to four a.m., I chose to sleep in and only play in one game on Sunday, a True d20 game set in the forthcoming Mecha vs. Kaiju setting. We started with creating level 1 characters, the latest recruits to the mecha-based defense force. Three of the PCs became mecha-pilots while the other three, including the two magical and psychic adepts, were assigned to the lower-powered power-suit division. While the mechas fought the giant monsters invading Japan, the others were on crowd-control and fought against the human terrorists (including ninja) out to sabotage the defense effort. I really enjoyed the mix of giant-robot and human-level conflicts and would definitely play it in the future.

Lee Gold

Your examples of details you might forget were about setting, not rules. I am all for books describing the setting and containing vital and interesting information for reference. Once everyone understands how the setting (and genre) works, you don't necessarily need rules for it. Or at least, I look for rules that are so simple and straight forward that applying them to the setting does not require looking anything up.

Spike Y Jones

In my DCHeroes group, there are 5 players and the GM. 3 of those players are currently running other campaigns, 1 has a campaign on hiatus, and the fifth has GMed in the past. In my Savage Worlds group, only 1 of the 5 players has not GMed. All the active GMs are running different systems and so only one of us would buy any particular adventure module anyway. But I concede that my groups are probably atypical.

Teaching has been an acceptable female occupation over a century, at least in the states and for elementary education. I suspect that the summer vacations were less of a factor in women choosing the career than the lack of options.

Before our "hobby" can become an "industry," the market must expand to the point that risk of large print runs is not longer an issue. The viability of low volume print-on-demand books is a symptom, not a cause.

Joshua Kronengold

My dictionary says "sync" is perfectly acceptable.

A system with randomizers can cause the game to go to new places, but what about randomless systems?

Brian Christopher Misiaszek

I completely agree that communication would be difficult between your Flatlanders and humans (for example). And I think it would be more difficult than between humans and other "3-dimensional" cultures. I just do not think humans would have to explain higher dimensions as was required in *Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions*.

Jonathan Nicholas

Where does character immersion fit in the whole GNS structure? The best I can figure out, it is a mixture of N and S and I want G to stay in the next room.

I do not think D&D can be applied to any setting. Maybe d20 can, but not D&D.

Some of the appeal of specific settings, I think, is very simulationist and fans of the setting want rules to accurately reflect the setting in a self-consistent manner. For example, the system for Glorantha should simulate the events of a hero quests.

A poorly written character (such as a Mary Sue or a ninja in Camelot) or a bad actor can diminish the quality and entertainment value of an otherwise good film.

So yes, other player's characters can reduce my level of enjoyment.

"Asking the player up front what is important to their character so (you) can be sure to include their desires in the game," is excellent advice. I think it should apply to all roleplaying games of any style, setting, or system. I would only add that it should be done with all players as a group so that they are all understand what is most important to each other. System matters, but I think player and GM communication and roleplaying matter *more*.

In spite of (and because of) our disagreements, I will be sorry to see you go.

Lisa Padol

I dislike most computer animation that tries to portray people as realistically as possible. There is a point where a character model is not realistic enough to pass for human but too realistic to be considered stylized. It exists in an aesthetic zone that I describe as "creepy." Give me *The Incredibles* over *The Polar Express* any day. For robots, this creepiness not only includes appearance but extends to behavior and speech. Once robots are so realistic that they are no longer creepy, they will find acceptance, though perhaps at the cost of paranoia and "robo-phobia."^{1 2}

Simon Reeve

Just because a child said the Scythian word for bread, do we know that was the intent? Perhaps the child was actually saying a different (made-up) word entirely that sounded the same. I refer you to the case of Koko the gorilla.

Someone "who knows what heesh is doing" in producing usable iron counts as having "skilled assistance." How did this individual come to possess the knowledge and techniques involved?

If the Nishendi sound like the Vistani (or The Roamers from Blue Rose), it is only because we are all drawing on the same historical sources and myths. I have never read Ravenloft.

Brian Rogers

Monopoly is not exactly zero-sum (unless counting the banker). I am boggled at the notion that zero-sum games are (inherently) boring; I assume you must be joking.

One of the great challenges of superhero games is that, as you noted in the lgtheme, players keep "trying to apply all that real world logic." In particular, game mechanics have a tendency to show how illogical superpowers really are and a game designer must find a balance between logic and genre conventions.

¹And now I wonder how well this hypothesis applies to negative attitudes toward members of the GLBT community. I think some of the same negative "That's a dude?!?" reactions could apply to transvestites, transsexuals, or androids.

²And I have since been referred to the research done on human-like robots and the concept of the Uncanny Valley, which matches my own observations.

Myles Corcoran

Would not a fixed 50-year copyright regardless of author lifespan help the orphan works problem? <> Personally, I find derivative works, and what exactly is considered derivative to be all too vague, especially when it comes to rpgs. But I cannot think of any simple definition. <> I agree with you about patent offices.

Lee Gold

The base assumption of (most?) skill systems is that a skill rank represents the character's ability under moderately stressful situations, typical of an adventurer. Bonuses are given for taking extra time or appropriate preparations. In d20, this is called "taking 20," which yields the best possible skill roll but this cannot be used under rushed or stressful situations.

Within an AI, I think there could be hundreds of processes that combine to form what we call the mind, both conscious and sub-conscious. I think it might very well be impossible to isolate any single process as being specifically conscious or sub-conscious. In other words, I expect true AI to be as complicated and intangible as natural or organic intelligence.

Keeping inventions and processes proprietary and guarded as trade secrets has the danger that they can be reversed-engineered and I do not think there is any legal recourse to prevent it (except for a usage agreement that comes with all software these days). Secret recipes for cola, fried chicken, or perfume, are much more difficult to reverse-engineer than a new fuel injection system (or anything electrical or mechanical).

Robert A. Dushay

To balance character and airplane combat, you could make the characters the airplanes. This could be quasi-campy like *Sandy the Sopwith*³ or 'punkish with man-machine interfaces (spirit transfer?) or transhuman artificial intelligence.

OTE might work perfectly well for Tekumel if the players understood the setting. This gets back to my "what do we need rules for if everyone is on the same page?" question. What can any system do to convey the setting when one or more players (or even the GM) lack a feel for the setting? This is something that classes can do well, if implemented properly. For OTE, I would create a short list of appropriate central and side traits to help things along.

Unfortunately, the term *open-minded* (like *non-partisan*) is used as a weapon against ones' opponents. If you do not agree with someone, they may accuse you of not having an open-mind. This happens all the time as an argument against skeptics and in favor of pseudo-science.

Peter C. Hildreth

Thanks for having me on such short notice. It was fun to visit outside of a convention. Personally, I do not know how you all survive with such short roleplaying sessions. Just when it was getting good, it ended.

Spike Y Jones

I cannot shake the notion that Iguanalon Slingsers sling Iguanalons. What do the Iguanalons call these things? That is the name I would use.

Jonathan Nicholas

I thought patent protection was there to encourage invention. The carrot is market protection, enforced by the stick of legal punishment for patent violators. Nowadays, I fear that patents themselves (no matter what they are about) have become a means of generating revenue by suing anyone who inadvertently violates it.

Louis La Mancusa

The U.S. only has one national election—that for President, and even that is technically a state-wide election given how the Electoral College works. Everything else on the ballot is local or state.

Given Kevin Siembieda's rapid defense of his copyrights and intellectual property, I would be very worried about reprinting a word of what he wrote without his explicit permission. A simple link to his essay could have sufficed.

Lisa Padol

I am put off by Baker's obsession with issues of GM vs. Player power. I get the distinct feeling he was railroaded by a bad Amber GM in his youth. :)

I have no idea what I am in GNS terms. I am a roleplayer. If pushed, I might say I'm an "immersionist." As a player, I want to feel my character inside-out. As a GM, I want to give my players interesting situations to roleplay. I wish I could roleplay GMCs better and give them better and more interesting interaction with other characters than just themselves. This is also linked to my dislike for playing multiple characters at once.

I do like playing with some elements that are purely rules-based, such as interesting character creation systems, but can also get annoyed with those same systems. I will consider OOC and meta-game concepts in my IC roleplaying, but I really dislike "telling stories" or excessive narration by players or the GM.

Simon Reeve

Hydrogen is not that explosive, though it does burn well. If attacked by a fire-breathing dragon, I do not think it matters too much whether a zeppelin is filled with hydrogen or helium. One would just be slightly faster and brighter as it fell to Earth. :)

Brian Rogers

I'm glad someone shared my sympathies regarding *Castle Falkenstein*.

³ *Ala Thomas the Tank Engine*.