

# PYRAMID<sup>®</sup>



Issue 3/41 March '12

## FANTASY WORLD-BUILDING



### THE TURNING POINTS OF HISTORY

by Matt Riggsby

#### SHADOWLAND RUNNERS

by Michele Armellini

#### IN THE JUNGLE

by Jason Brick

#### THE DUODECENNIAL DEVIATIONS

by Steven Marsh

#### GOD IS DEAD

by David L. Pulver

#### THE GNOMISH MAFIA

by Megan McDonald

#### THE CHILDREN OF THE COMING DARKNESS

by J. Edward Tremlett

# STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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## Article Colors

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

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- Brown*: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)
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- Purple*: Systemless Features
- Green*: Distinguished Columnists

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Inspiration for the innovative soul!

# IN THIS ISSUE

Zeus never said, "Well, I think I'm done meddling in mortal affairs." Most GMs feel the same way about their fantasy worlds; the desire to add and innovate is strong in such hearty souls. This *Pyramid* is devoted to their efforts at fantasy world-building!

Matt Riggsby melds the historical skill he displayed in *GURPS Hot Spots: Renaissance Florence* with the chaos-loving creativity he forged in *GURPS Dungeon Fantasy 8: Treasure Tables*, delivering *The Turning Points of History*. These tables can help you create vivid histories for the smallest berg or the grandest kingdoms. Learn how today is shaped by the past!

*GURPS* author Michele Armellini takes you to an empire where news travels fast using *Shadowland Runners*. Find out how they face the perils of another plane (and its odd *GURPS* rules) to accomplish their missions with only their wits.

*GURPS Fourth Edition* co-architect David L. Pulver explores what happens when *God Is Dead* in the latest installment of *Eidetic Memory*. How does the demise of various gods affect a setting (in systemless and *GURPS* terms), and what can heroes do about it?

Transport the delights of dungeon-delving action above-ground by journeying *In the Jungle*. Learn about the various levels – including hazards and travel options – of a canopy forest in this article suitable for any world with trees.

Though small in stature, underestimating *The Gnomish Mafia* would be a big mistake. This systemless article describes key players, motivations, and activities of a "family business."

*The Children of the Coming Darkness* is a new world-breaking cult for *GURPS Banestorm*. Only the desperate or insane would join them – but such souls can be the most dangerous adversaries in the world.

Creating a new calendar for a fantasy setting is a great way to summarize a culture's important events. When those important events have tangible effects on people's lives, things get really interesting, as *The Duodecennial Deviations* demonstrates. What do you do when *everyone* has the same *GURPS* advantage or disadvantage in a year?

Bring out your dead, and help your adventurers get to know *Spirits in Everyday Life*. Find out how folks can influence them and appease them, with *GURPS* guidelines for what happens if they do *and* don't.

This month's *Random Thought Table* challenges the normal world-building rules. *Odd and Ends* offers ideas that couldn't fit elsewhere, including character suggestions for jungle-delvers, plus a *Murphy's Rules* that's just dog-gone funny. It's your world; make your mark on it!

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# FROM THE EDITOR

## MORE COGS FOR THE WONDERWORKS

Fantasy worlds are voracious pits, demanding constant tribute in the form of fiddly bits and options. This is one of the appeals; most fantasy settings' abilities to absorb, assimilate, and incorporate new material means that they are constantly fresh. A long-running campaign can be reborn time and again, in small ways with the addition of minor bits, or shaken to the foundation with radical, world-altering revelations.

This issue of *Pyramid* tries to give possibilities for all manner of the spectrum. It includes global events and revelations, faraway lands that can be dropped into an otherwise-quiet campaign, and smaller bits that can be added as needed to any existing world. This is one of the more varied issues of *Pyramid* we've done, and we hope there's something for everyone looking to develop their fantastic fiefdoms.

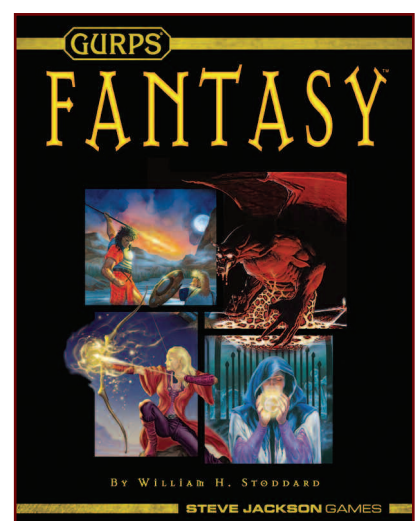
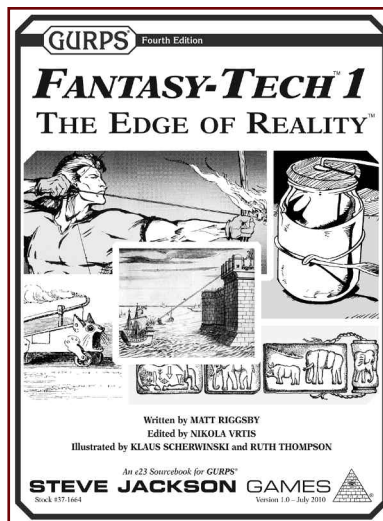
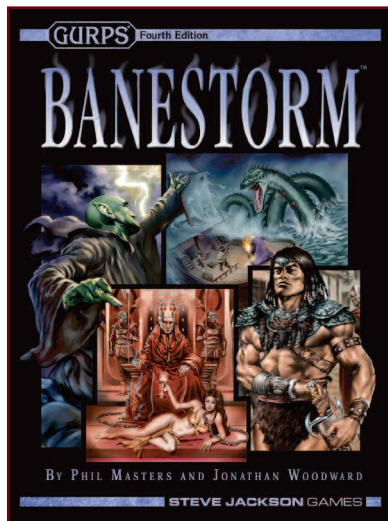
Of course, just about anything related to a fantasy world can be modified as desired. Perhaps the Gnomish Mafia

(pp. 21-23) isn't limited to a small geographical area but rather extends globally. Maybe the Duodecennium (pp. 27-31) is a one-time event; if the heroes can survive that decade-plus, their lives will return to "normal." And the history-building insight (pp. 4-8) is designed to be scaled up or down as needed.

Fantasy worlds are some of the most forgiving – and even rewarding – of patchwork constructions. Perhaps that's one of the reasons it's been the most popular genre in role-playing games since . . . well, as long as there have been roleplaying games!

## WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

Did this issue add to your world in exciting new ways? Were some bits more fantastic than others? Did you find some neat/new/nifty way to use the material herein? You can file your field reports privately at [pyramid@sjgames.com](mailto:pyramid@sjgames.com), or share your research findings with the world (or worlds!) at [forums.sjgames.com](http://forums.sjgames.com).



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# THE TURNING POINTS OF HISTORY

BY MATT RIGGSBY

One of the important things about history, like the rest of real life, is that it's messy. The constant appearance of new and different phenomena makes it interesting to read, but sometimes frustrating to design a history from scratch and make it sound convincing. One common mistake is *not* to assume that completely novel factors will arise, and arise frequently. For example, from a high-level narrative point of view, history after the Second World War doesn't make a lot of sense. Most alternate histories play with the consequences of different resolutions to the war, but usually with some subset of the great powers being the *only* significant powers in the aftermath with no new rivals on the horizon. For example, Philip K. Dick's classic *The Man in the High Castle* provides two such alternatives, whittling down the great powers to either Germany vs. Japan or U.S. vs. Britain. But the post-war reality is very different because of the rise of new powers and unexpected transformations of old ones. European rivals have peacefully become an allied power bloc; Russia has subsided as an enemy of the West but remains a separate power; China has resumed the place as a major power it had lost some centuries earlier; and oil-exporting nations have become a power in themselves. If history had an editor, she'd be demanding to know why the French, English, and Germans are getting along all of a sudden and where those wealthy guys in the desert came from.

*God cannot alter the past, but historians can.*  
– Samuel Butler

In a rich, textured history, things change, and often do so without significant advanced warning if you only look at the "major players." It can appear, particularly if viewed through the lens of a scholarly tradition, nationalist narrative, or local

legendry, kind of random. Which suggests something involving dice, doesn't it? The tables below provide historical events that can be used as historical turning points for various parts of just about any fantasy setting the GM has created, be it a town, a people, a nation, or an entire continent. The GM can attach these events to an overarching historical narrative, such as the rise of a great power or succession of legendary figures, in order to create a chronology that feels detailed and real. The history can, in turn, provide opportunities in the present for adventures informed by the past.

## EVENTS

The first thing to come up with is a list of things that happened. When working up a patch of history, the GM may roll for random items or just pick ones that look appealing. These can then form the important points of a historical narrative. Roll 1d, 1d, 1d.

### Politics, War, and Demographics

#### 1-3, 1, 1-2 – Alliance/peace treaty

A lasting accord is reached with a potential or real rival.\*

#### 1-3, 1, 3-4 – Assimilation

Some group is gradually absorbed into another – for example, the merger of previously feuding clans, or conquering foreigners slowly adopting the ways of their more numerous conquests and losing their distinct identity.†

#### 1-3, 1, 5-6 – Conquest

The society or location in question takes over or is conquered by a neighbor.\*

#### 1-3, 2, 1 – Democratization, major

Political power extends to a much larger group than before – for example, the country becomes a republic, or former serfs are freed from their obligations and given their own property.†

#### 1-3, 2, 2-3 – Democratization, minor

Political power extends to a somewhat larger group than before – for example, the country's noblemen win limited rights (as with the Magna Carta), or a ruler is forced to accept an advisory council with veto power.†

# IN THE JUNGLE

BY JASON BRICK

Dungeons are a core part of the fantasy genre, from a sapper's tunnels to a cavern complex to the Mines of Moria. If adventurers have a native habitat, that habitat is the dungeon. Dungeons are . . .

*Exotic.* The dripping walls, echoing caves and eerie passages set a scene that reminds everybody they're in a fantasy adventure. It's a keystone, like swords and dragons, that keeps everybody immersed in the genre.

*Restrictive.* They provide limited, but interesting and meaningful choices. Every dungeon is essentially a flowchart of if/then decisions and their consequences. This lets the GM put all of his energy into a handful of possibilities, rather than spreading mental energy thin with a wider array of potential scenarios.

*Full of action.* A dungeon can be smaller than a football field, yet home to dozens of memorable encounters. This is possible because the walls and tunnels block lines of sight, separating areas into discrete sections despite actually being quite close. This is the same phenomenon that makes a house feel larger than its yard, though the opposite is probably true.

*Built on multiple levels.* Each level can represent a different theme, level of danger, or new set of inhabitants. Moving up or down a dungeon level creates a natural flow in the narrative of exploration, and can serve as a milestone in an adventuring party's journey.

*Inherently hazardous.* They're filled with traps, pits, deadfalls, and chances to plummet from precipitous heights. These features may exist on their own, or might be part of a larger context serving as clues for exploration or added challenge in a fight.

*Home to monsters.* They are often packed with an improbably density of alpha predators, considering the available food supply. Ecology aside, these dark destinations are home to an array of critters with jaws to bite and claws to catch the unwary. This population is one of the two main reasons adventurers enter a dungeon.

*Stocked with loot.* This is the other reason treasure-hunters put dungeons on their adventuring itinerary. Down below, wealth awaits the brave in the form of coins, gems, art, and magical goodies.

All of these traits contribute to making dungeons the fantasy staple they are, but even dungeons can become boring over the course of a long-standing campaign. What was once exotic becomes commonplace. But how can the GM provide a new adventuring environment while keeping the benefits of a typical delve? Where can adventurers find all the features, hazards, and inhabitants of their favorite underground locales? By going up!

## THE CANOPY FOREST

Dark passages wind between roots and trunks, while natural spires tower to dizzying heights above. Strange beasts prowl at every level of this ecosystem, filling the air with the sounds of their hunting, running, killing and dying. Strange treasures, natural and artificial, lie waiting to be discovered. All in all, the canopy forest provides all the benefits of dungeon adventuring wrapped in a new package. These ecosystems . . .

*Are just as exotic as dungeons.* Fantasy roleplayers like dungeon adventuring because no fantasy roleplayer has visited a monster-stocked dungeon . . . but many fantasy heroes have. Unless a gaming group includes field biologists, the reaches of a canopy forest are new to both the players and their explorers.

*Limit choices with a series of meaningful decisions.* Only so many paths up and down vines, through the brush and along high limbs can exist in the labyrinthine expanse of a dense canopy. Explorers navigate these byways just as they would an underground passage.

*Restrict lines of sight* with brush, leaves, hanging moss, and the deep darkness of forest shade. This creates the same densely packed action as the best tunnel complex.

*Exist on multiple levels.* Each canopy layer has a different environment, with its own traits, inhabitants, and hazards. Many layers are thick enough to subdivide into levels of their own. Adventurers make vertical passage by climbing tree trunks, shinnying up vines, and following branches as they wind up or down through the foliage.

*Are full of hazards.* Visitors must walk and fight along limbs far above ground. They have to stay alert for venomous and diseased native life, quicksand, and deadfalls. The thick bush of a canopy forest is no place for the timid or unprepared.

*Support a population of dangerous beasts.* Each level of the canopy forest is home to an array of alpha predators. These range from large hunting carnivores to territorial omnivores to hordes of stinging and venomous insects. Every one of them is more at home in the crowded, treacherous upper limbs than any member of the adventuring party.

*Reward adventurers with loot.* On Earth, scientists call tropical rainforests "the world's pharmacy" because of the wealth of valuable plants found inside. Pelts, specimens, and rare woods are other examples of the treasure waiting for those brave enough to harvest them.

All of this is true of real-world canopy forests. These are exotic, dangerous places rife for exploration even before adding magic, monsters, and other fantasy elements. Once the GM includes some intelligent and savage civilizations, a tree-dwelling dragon or two, and a network of nests for giant ants, a forest becomes the perfect milieu for fantasy adventure.

# THE DUODECENNium IN THE CAMPAIGN

The Duodecennium aims to add some the epic feel of an extended fantasy calendar to any campaign: "Behold, the Year of Spirits is upon us again!" Even similar adventure premises can vary considerably from year to year; a simple escort mission is very different in the Year of Safety compared to the same scenario in the Year of Lies. In addition, long-running campaigns can see how the world ebbs and flows around the various obstacles the Duodecennium presents.

There are also a number of other options that can be used with the Duodecennium.

## THE COUNTERCYCLE

The Duodecennium presumes that all sapient life forms suffer the same effects at the same time. However, this need not be the case. For example, the surface world and the subterranean races may be six years out of sync; while the dayball dwellers live through the Sexennium Bonum, those below are in the Sexennium Malum (and vice versa).

## DIFFERENT TIME

The Duodecennium is designed arbitrarily around the idea of 12 year-long units. There's nothing requiring the length of each unit to be a year, and making it shorter or longer can radically alter the campaign.

### The Zodiac

Instead of a 12-year cycle, this system can easily map to a 12-month cycle. Assuming an Earth-like climate, the mapping will need to be done carefully (since weather can have an effect on what is and isn't possible in a month). One possibility – based on an Earth-like northern hemisphere – is shown in the following table.

Month	Theme	Month	Theme
January	Acuity	July	Death
February	Acumen	August	Fear
March	Holding	September	Famine
April	Fortune	October	Misfortune
May	Safety	November	Nightmare
June	Lies	December	Spirit

### The Day Is Long

For truly madcap campaigns, this cycle could repeat every day! In this case, the GM determines the effect of having some of these advantages or disadvantages for a few hours, or to replace those abilities with something more appropriate.

One suggested possibility in this regard is shown in the following table.

Time	Theme	Time	Theme
3 a.m.-5 a.m.	Spirit	3 p.m.-5 p.m.	Lies
5 a.m.-7 a.m.	Acuity	5 p.m.-7 p.m.	Death
7 a.m.-9 a.m.	Acumen	7 p.m.-9 p.m.	Fear
9 a.m.-11 a.m.	Holding	9 p.m.-11 p.m.	Famine
11 a.m.-1 p.m.	Fortune	11 p.m.-1 a.m.	Misfortune
1 p.m.-3 p.m.	Safety	1 a.m.-3 a.m.	Nightmare

## THE CYCLE BEGINS

Add the Duodecennium to an existing fantasy campaign by having some cosmic calamity spill onto the world, and its effects have altered the fabric of time itself.

In this case, the GM can play with introducing the new abilities, letting the heroes become accustomed to their wiles before replacing them with a new advantage. Of course, eventually all those delicious free advantages need to give way to disadvantages . . .

## The Universal Problem

One way for the GM to have fun with this idea is to envision what, exactly, would happen if these abilities were introduced universally. For example, if everyone suddenly had Luck for the next month, and they *knew* they had Luck, what would the effect on the world be? Or if the evil empire knew that everyone would start consuming more food in two months, how would it turn that knowledge to its advantage . . . and how would the rest of the world stop it?

These ideas and the tension they cause can add a suitably epic feel to a campaign. If all civil war happens in the Time of Famine, then the world will come to view that period with uncertainty.

Similarly, elements from a world's history (even if randomly generated – see pp. 4-8) can be projected onto the Duodecennial system. A great event has happened in the past; what boon or bane is associated with that event?

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor who lives outside of Indianapolis, Indiana, with his wife and son. For more details about him, see his *Random Thought Table* on pp. 35-36.

Special thanks to Fade Manley who helped keep me from embarrassing myself with Latin.

## ABOUT *GURPS*

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