

WORLDS WITHOUT NUMBER

FREE VERSION

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TALES OF THE LATTER EARTH

The stars gutter and the skies fade and the earth grows weary with years. Ages of men and of Outsiders have ascended and been forgotten, and only the bones of their cities and the dust of their dreams remain upon this tired world. The Legacy of their laws is woven deep now, the edicts of dead gods and fallen sorcerer-kings made to trace patterns of power we no longer understand. We are heirs to their unseen empires.

Yet our kings are beggar-princes at best, and our sages but stumbling children. So deep is the past of Latter Earth that no one truly understands what has gone before or can lay sure hands on the Legacy we have inherited. We wield strange powers we no longer comprehend and summon forces that were never meant for our petty purposes. We live in a world haunted by those who came before us, and we suffer for the sins of their dead.

Our kingdoms struggle to survive in this mis-made world. We toil with muscle and the work of beasts rather than the strange devices of sorcery our ancestors wielded, and our lives are ones of simple labor. Sages have preserved inscriptions of the ancient mechanisms, but their subtle arts no longer work in this decayed age and the Legacy has changed from the days when they were still of use. Nothing is sure any longer save for the strength in a human arm and the sharpness of an iron blade. Our armies grip spears where our ancestors wielded suns.

Humanity has not always been the master of the Latter Earth. In former ages Outsiders came from the skies to be lords over us, changing our world to better suit their purposes. We were forced below, into the earth to dwell within the Deeps, and the world was made hollow with our delving. Only after long ages were our sorcerers and heroes able to drive out the interlopers. The remnants of their rule remain on the surface, *arratus* of strange plants and terrible beasts and wastes that choke a man with their noxious vapors. Sometimes these Outsider lands still hold a scattering of the old lords, bitter and hateful against their usurping slaves, and sometimes they come out to punish our lands.

We, too, have changed with the eons. Both the Outsiders and ancient sorcerer-kings worked changes on humanity, forming some among us into other beings more suitable to their ends. Some of these changed ones remain allies to their human cousins, while others nurse only the fury of ancient instinct or present bitterness. Some have their own kingdoms and domains in distant parts of the world, and some hide in nighted places where they can better prey on us. They are the hands of the past, the living relics that often work us woe.

Yet we are not content to struggle with the past and its changed children. We must also war against each other in the present, princes and lords vying over rulership of some miserable spit of land or patch of blood-soaked earth. Some fight over the rich tombs of the ancients, while others bloody each other out of pride, ambition, or the simple pleasure of conquest. A strong king brings peace to his people, but his neighbors will ever be jealous of that strength. Heroes are needed to fight in defense of their homes and their lords.

We have heroes still. Men and women graced with no more than courage and resolve may yet rise to light a new age with the fire of their example. Some may yet even rise to become Legates, blessed with a direct link with the Legacy and the gift of its superhuman powers. A Legate may be wicked or just, selfish or compassionate, but they all bear the strength of the ancients. The warriors among them strike like the fury of the storm and Legate-sorcerers invoke marvels out of a forgotten age. The greatest among them might cleave armies with their naked blades or call up cities from a barren waste.

Yet one need not be a Legate to be a hero, nor wield the powers of the ancients to give precious help to the present. Throughout the Latter Earth there are countless lands and people in need of help. Defense against the depredations of monstrous beasts, protection from the anger of the Outsiders, wisdom to defeat wicked lords and mend bloody quarrels... a brave heart and a strong arm can never be useless in this world.

Even those who care little for the troubles of others will find profit in daring the black delvings of the Deeps and bringing up the treasures of the past from the grip of the once-men who yet hold them. Terrible wildernesses of alien beasts and strange flora still shroud the ruined cities of the Outsiders, and brave explorers can weight their horses with gold if they can find safe paths through these desolations. The world is wide, and strange wonders await over each new horizon.

This is the Latter Earth but it is not the end of days. Our ancestors rose and fell ten thousand times, and we can rise yet again. Our lands are impoverished and our people are hard-pressed by their own folly and the shadows of a bottomless past, but we have courage still. There have been ages of darkness worse than this, and dawn came again when they passed. The stars gutter and the skies fade and the earth grows weary with years, but it has not ended yet. There is time enough for new heroes to rise from the ashes we have inherited.

Will you be among them?

HEROES OF A TWILIGHT AGE

Worlds Without Number is a fantasy role-playing game set in the far future of the Latter Earth, after innumerable eons of human history, alien rule, and unfathomable arcane evolution. The players take up the role of adventurers in this fading age, raising sword and sorcery against the foes of humanity and the obstacles that hinder their own ambitious aims. Many will perish on the spears of bitter rivals, be rent by the talons of monstrous beasts, or fall prey to their own reckless daring. Others, however, may yet live to obtain a name more glorious than kings.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN THIS GAME?

The characters in *Worlds Without Number* are assumed to be budding adventurers, men and women who have particular talents suitable to a life of daring exploration, bloody battles, or ruthless intrigue. They are skilled and capable practitioners of their particular specialties, but all of them are acutely mortal, and a too-ready recourse to their blades is likely to get them killed early in their career.

More experienced and skilled heroes have less to fear from an unlucky spear-thrust, but even the most hardened hero must be wary of a quick death when facing numerous foes. A gritty life of swords and sorcery awaits them.

Every hero in the game has some sort of goal or ambition. It may be an honest and simple desire for wealth beyond their dreams of avarice, or it might be a quest to avenge himself on a tyrannical lord, or it could be a dream of establishing a new nation for her exiled people. A hero may never live to see their ambition become real, but every PC has *some* sort of goal to drive them, even if that goal may change over time.

Some heroes pursue their goals through scavenging the remnants of a more glorious past. The ancient sorcerer-kings raised mighty cities and wrought wondrous marvels, many of which are still functional enough to be precious to modern humanity. Adventurers willing to plumb their ruined cities or search their ancient strongholds can come out bearing a king's ransom on their backs, or discover artifacts that could shift the balance of power among nations. Given the perils awaiting in such places, however, there are always far more who go in than ever emerge again.

Others delve into the depths, exploring the ancient subterranean Deeps that once incarcerated humanity during the age of the Outsider lords, the aliens who once ruled the Latter Earth. Many of these Deeps were never opened after the sorcerer-kings overthrew their masters, and the bones of their inhabitants now lie tangled with the common trinkets and tools that have become precious to their heirs. Monstrous Outsider beasts and maddened automatons still lurk in the darkness, as well as the degenerate and crazed remnants of the original human prisoners.

A few heroes are even bold enough to venture into the howling wastelands of the *arratus*, the desolate xenofomed territories poisoned by the Outsiders to make them more homely to the aliens. The hideous flora and fauna that infest these places are lethal to humans, but the treasures there are often richest from the difficulty of reaching them. Ancient human cities or Outsider strongholds are sometimes buried in the heart of an ancient *arratu*, their wealth preserved for the heroes brave enough to dare their poisoned streets.

Yet ruin exploration and expeditions into the wilderness are not the only adventures to be had. The lands of the Latter Earth are a patchwork of young kingdoms, savage tribes, and sullen empires, all of them with their own quarrels and ambitions. Adventurers often find themselves enlisted by the powerful to carry out their more dangerous tasks, and can easily be drawn into the intrigue between rival powers. A hero who dreams of forging their own empire can hope to achieve it with enough coin, enough friends, and enough luck. Nations are always rising and fading away in the roil of the present day, and there are less likely kings to be found than a cunning and successful hero.

Exploration and intrigue are paths for pursuing a hero's ambitions, but an accomplished adventurer must also deal with the simple human challenges of life in a hard and half-tamed world. There will always be petitioners seeking the help of the strong, injustices to pique a hero's ire, and calamities that threaten people and places they care about. The Latter Earth is old and careless of its inhabitants, and many terrible things come to pass for want of brave souls capable of forestalling them.

HOW DOES THIS GAME PLAY?

Worlds Without Number is based on an "Old School Renaissance" rules chassis strongly inspired by the classic gaming books of Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, Tom Moldvay, and Zeb Cook. The roots of this system date back to the very earliest days of the hobby. There are millions of people worldwide who understand the basic outline of the system, and this enormous well of familiarity is one of the main reasons it was chosen as a base.

The system in *Worlds Without Number* has received years of effective use and playtesting in the form of its compatible sci-fi sister game, *Stars Without Number*, and I'm confident that the great majority of readers will find it a perfectly solid, playable, effective framework for their sword and sorcery adventures. Even so, I understand that a good many readers will have their own preferences in game systems, and may have a different rule system in mind for running their campaigns.

This is perfectly reasonable, because ultimately, *Worlds Without Number* is more about supporting a *style* of gaming than a particular system. This game is built from the ground up to support the GM in running



a “sandbox” style of campaign, one where the thrust of the action is entirely dependent on the ambitions and goals of the players. The tools in this book are built to support this play style no matter what game system is being used.

Modern gamers may be unfamiliar with sandbox-style tabletop gaming, as it’s a style that has fallen partially out of use since the early days of the hobby. The earliest campaigns were almost all sandbox-style, with rotating troupes of PCs venturing around a shared campaign landscape and plunging into whichever adventurous opportunities seemed most appealing. Contemporary gaming tends to favor “story arc” style campaigns, where the PCs are faced with a preordained series of challenges and plot points that they must negotiate as best they can. These story arcs can come to very different conclusions based on the actions and choices of the PCs, but the campaign is fundamentally about a single, particular plot and the PCs’ engagement with it. It’s a style of gaming that allows for precise story beats, unified themes, and a lot of other qualities that many gamers enjoy a great deal.

Sandbox gaming offers pleasures of its own, however, and some of them are harder to find in modern story arc campaigns. A sandbox campaign focuses around the goals and ambitions of the PCs rather than a pre-existing story. The GM provides the PCs with interesting situations and opportunities, but it’s up to the PCs to decide which of them they want to engage with and what hooks they want to pursue. At the end of every session, the GM asks the players what their goal for the next session will be, and the preparation they make for the next evening’s game will be based on that goal.

Sandbox campaigns offer endless surprises and freshness to the GM. Even they don’t know what’s going to happen in each session, because there’s no plot they need to follow and no need to worry about the PCs doing the “right thing” to “move the adventure forward”. Each

session is simply an opportunity or a situation; it’s up to the PCs to make the most of it, and if they fail, well, they can try something else next time. The campaign is about the things they want it to be about, when they want it. They’re never locked into a particular story arc and never compelled to stick around a tedious situation, so there’s much less chance of the GM finding the party bored with a campaign thread that’s overstayed its welcome.

Some GMs are intimidated by this style of campaigning because they don’t feel confident in their own preparations. If the players can go anywhere and seek anything, they reason, don’t they have to build an entire world out before the first session? Isn’t that a crushing amount of creative work, the vast majority of which will never become relevant to the players?

Worlds Without Number is designed to allay this concern and give the GM the tools, methods, and procedures for reducing the preparation to a manageable amount of work. This book will show you how to build out the bare skeleton of your campaign setting, establish only the parts that actually matter in play, and handle the session-by-session administration and prep work necessary for actually running the game. You’ll never have to build more than a single game session ahead of your players, a prospect that can make sandbox gaming even easier on a GM than story arc gaming. After all, you’ll never flesh out a five-session plot only to find the players getting bored halfway through the arc.

Now that you understand both what heroes are intended to do in *Worlds Without Number* and what a GM can expect to find in this book, it’s time to start your hero’s career. With luck, discretion, and the right amount of boldness, it may yet prove to be a long and glorious one. Lacking these qualities... well, there’s a reason that character creation is at the front of the book.

CHARACTER CREATION

The first step in playing *Worlds Without Number* is to roll up each player's character, or "PC". While it's possible to play the game with just a single player and a game master, or "GM", it works best with a group of three to five players and a GM. A solitary hero is hard-pressed to survive the myriad perils of Latter Earth, and a number of trustworthy companions are needed if a hero is to have much chance of victory.

It's generally best to make characters together with the others in your group, so as to make sure everyone's hero is the sort to play well together. PCs don't always have to *like* each other, but if they can't trust each other to watch their backs, their adventures are apt to end in swift and unhappy ways.

The character creation below assumes your heroes will be adventuring in the world of Latter Earth, as described in the chapter starting on page 94. Readers who have an interest in the setting's particulars can page forward and look it over before continuing. Those who just want to get started creating their adventurer can continue on below.

WHAT PLAYERS NEED TO KNOW

Your character is an adventurer in the ruins of the Latter Earth, a world set unfathomably far in the future. Untold eons of human and alien development have come and gone, and you and your companions are natives of a now-savage and primitive world built on the grave of the past.

Magic exists in the form of ancient relics, enigmatic powers that respond to the correct rituals, and creatures fashioned by inexplicable sciences. Sorcerers cultivate the scraps of understanding that they have preserved in order to wield these powers, and the occasional eruptions of ancient, twisted magic are a hazard in many places still.

Most nations on Latter Earth are feudal or monar-chic, ruled over by some tyrant with the strength to maintain order or some military elite capable of protecting their charges from the perils of monstrous foes and jealous neighbors. Some dynasties are ancient bloodlines of magically-blessed nobles, while others are no more than this season's bandit king and his henchmen. The common folk survive as best they can, making the bargains they must with their lords in exchange for protection and some semblance of law.

Technology is primitive, with brute force and the occasional windmill or water mill powering the little industry that exists. The natural laws of physics have been so corrupted by prior eons of meddling and the accrued changes known as the Legacy that more advanced technology is unreliable at best. This capriciousness has all but extinguished scientific curiosity or technological advancement among the people of Latter Earth, as what use are such studies when the subtler laws of nature are always changing?

In this world, your hero seeks adventure. Whether fighting against the constant peril of monstrous creatures, defending communities from the depredations of their neighbors, delving into the ancient Deeps that humanity once occupied, or exploring the trackless wilderness of an Outsider-altered Latter Earth, there is treasure, glory, and terrible death to be found by the brave.

Your hero may have had a very mundane past. Perhaps they were no more than a peasant girl who tired of her little village, or a young sailor who wants better pay for his courage than a sea captain can offer. Yet your hero has some sort of knack or capability that marks them out as being fit for adventure, whether that's a gift for violence, exceptional talent at a skill, or some modicum of magical prowess.

Your hero must, however, have a purpose. They must have some goal or direction for their ambitions, because *Worlds Without Number* is a sandbox-style game where the PCs will be the ones to decide what kind of adventures are sought. If you don't have a goal, you won't be able to contribute to that direction.

And not least of all, your hero must be able to cooperate with the rest of the group. Loners and troublemakers work well in novels but terribly at the table; be good to the other players, and make someone who will actually participate usefully with everyone else. Adventuring is dangerous, and going it alone is a recipe for swift death.

With these things said, it's time to start making your character.

LEGATES

The rules in this section describe the creation of normal PC heroes. They might be gifted swordsmen, capable young wizards, or talented thieves and explorers, but they are fundamentally normal human beings. They lack the link with the Legacy that makes for the superhuman powers of a Legate.

In the example campaign world of the Latter Earth, a heroic PC can hope to become a Legate only after reaching the peak of their potential. Only after exhausting the limits of normal human capacity can they gain the recognition of the Legacy and inherit its gifts.

In other campaign settings, superhuman heroes such as Legates may not exist at all. In a sword & sorcery pulp setting, it might be entirely inappropriate for heroes to ever become so personally mighty, while a high fantasy setting might make such divine strength more available to PCs.

Assuming Legates exist in your campaign, the rules for advancing in their powers appear in the deluxe version of *Worlds Without Number*, as given in the table of contents.



A SUMMARY OF CHARACTER CREATION

For your convenience, here's a quick summary of the character creation process. Experienced players can simply go down the list to generate their next bold adventurer, while those new to the game can use it as a guide as they go through the steps detailed on the following pages. A blank character sheet suitable for printing can be found toward the end of this chapter.

Note that some steps indicate that you should roll or pick skills from those listed on page 10. The first time you roll or pick a skill, it starts at level-0. The second time, it becomes level-1. The third time, you can instead pick any other skill of your choice that's less than level-1. No novice hero's skills can exceed level-1.

1. Roll your six **attributes** in order or assign them from an array, using Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Wisdom, and Charisma. Attributes reflect the basic potential of your hero. Roll 3d6 six times and assign them in order, or use an array of 14, 12, 11, 10, 9, 7 assigned as you wish. If you randomly roll your scores you may then pick one attribute to change to a score of 14.
2. Mark down your **attribute modifiers** for each score. When rolling dice that are affected by an attribute, you don't apply the whole score; instead, you apply the attribute modifier. A score of 3 is a -2, 4-7 is a -1, 8-13 is no modifier, 14-17 is +1, and 18 is +2.
3. Pick a **background** from the list on page 11, and note down any particular details you decide for it. You gain the free skill listed under the background name at level-0, which equates to an ordinary professional knowledge of it.
4. Decide whether to roll for additional skills or pick them. If you pick skills, you can choose two more skills from the Learning table for your background, with the exception of entries that say "Any Skill", which you may not pick. You cannot pick entries from the Growth table. If you're not sure what to pick, just take the "Quick Skills" listed for your background at level-0.
5. If you choose to roll for your skills, you can roll up to three times, dividing up your rolls between the Growth and Learning tables as you wish. When you roll on the Growth table, some results may say "+2 Physical" or "+2 Mental". In the former case, you can add two points to either Strength, Dexterity, or Constitution, or one point to two different stats. In the latter case, you can add two points to either Intelligence, Wisdom, or Charisma, or divide the bonus between two of them.
6. Choose your **class** from those starting on page 18, representing those talents you have that are most relevant to an adventurer's lifestyle. If your hero isn't well-described by Warrior, Expert, or Mage, you can choose Adventurer and mix classes.
7. Choose your **Focus**, representing the side talents or particular specializations of your hero. You can pick one level of a Focus of your choice. Characters with the Expert class or the Partial Expert feature of the Adventurer class get one level of a non-combat Focus for free in addition to this. They can spend both levels on the same Focus, starting with level 2 in it if they wish. Characters with the Warrior class or Partial Warrior feature of the Adventurer class can do the same in choosing one level of a combat-related Focus.
8. Optionally, if your GM is allowing non-human PCs, you can make your character into one such creature by spending a Focus pick on the appropriate origin Focus. Nonhumans are described in the bestiary chapter, starting on page 280. Note that not all campaigns allow non-human PCs, even if they exist in the campaign world. They may not fit the particular tone of your GM's game.
9. Now **pick one skill** of your choice to reflect your hero's outside interests, natural talents, hobby expertise, or other personal focus.
10. If you've chosen the Mage class or chosen to be an Adventurer with the Partial Mage class, you need to pick a tradition for your sorcerer. These are listed in the Magic chapter starting on page 60. You may be a full-fledged High Mage, Necromancer, or Elementalist, or you may be an Adventurer with only a partial class in these arcane arts, or expertise in the magically-gifted partial classes of Healer or Vowed.
11. If you're a full High Mage, Elementalist, or Necromancer, or a Partial in two of these, choose four starting spells from your class' first level spell list. Partial Mages of these classes pick only two. Record these on the back of your sheet.
12. Roll your maximum **hit points** and add your Constitution modifier, to a minimum of 1 hit point. The die you roll depends on the class you chose. Warriors roll 1d6+2, Experts roll 1d6, and Mages roll 1d6-1. Adventurers use the tables on page 21, depending on which partial classes they took. If you lose all your hit points, your PC will be mortally wounded or slain outright.