Gaming primitive

olde house rules   J. R. George

To Robyn, whose passion
for all things faerie laid
the foundation for this game
even while her love and
support laid the foundation for
this gamer's happiness...

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intro

Fantasy roleplaying split from historical wargames sometime in the early 1970s, although retaining clear signs of their common ancestry. The referee, an umpire to opposing armies, became a worldbuilder while everyone else, formerly enemy commanders warring against each other, forged an enduring alliance seeking glory in a medieval world of magic and monsters. A new hobby was soon born, and it didn't take long for creative ideas to start rolling in. But for a brief, glorious while, the pastime existed in its primitive state, unburdened and uncomplicated.

Luckily for generations of fantasy gamers, its final conquest was almost immediate, propelling this newborn hobby beyond anything its progenitors could have imagined. This isn't a bad thing (all gaming is good gaming), but there remains something undeniably special about the early days. Something well worth the effort to conserve. Enter Gaming Primitive...
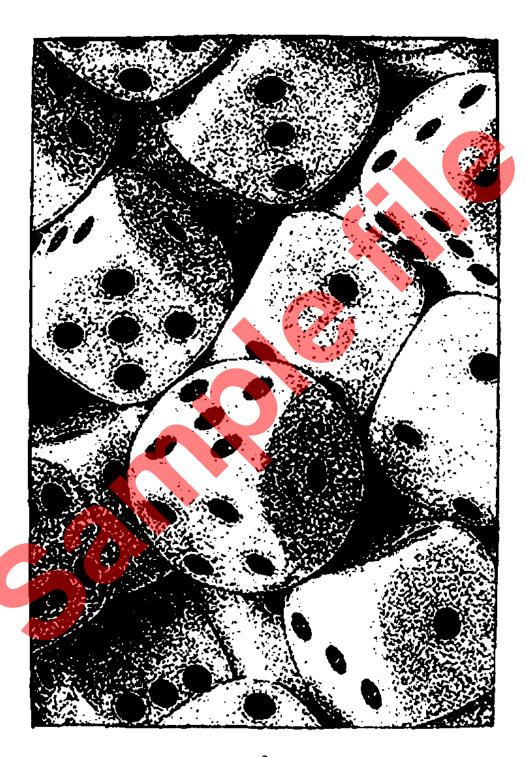
This book aims to reclaim what made the earliest games so special to begin with. It's an intangible thing; but perhaps it had

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something to do with their (relative) newness. And their origins as converted wargames. These were homebrew rules with little beyond morale and movement tables. Systems that emphasized strategy over complex builds. Rules designed and tested before there was a mainstream to draw inspiration from. Fantasy is big business now; but there was a time when its conventions hadn't been thought of yet, accounting for its nascent charm...

The earliest games were simpler because all new things are simple, but also because players expected their referee to make the decisions. Rules weren't yet the final authority, being just a guide, and their freestyle approach meant that characters were basically proxies for the minds of the players. Minds capable of asking questions and solving problems, with gear their primary customization. Magic was there, but it played second fiddle to strategy, which underscores a timeless truth: the answer to any given problem lies in the meeting of creative minds.

This is the philosophical bedrock of Gaming Primitive and the foundation for all it promises. Now readers will note that a certain pioneering game was moving beyond this model almost immediately. This isn't bad; but progress is always relative, and the new pastime was changing from the start. Gaming Primitive aspires to something older and closer to its freestyle roots, and herein lies its central defining experience: simpler, open-ended rules the players can make their own, leaving room for personal strategy (and clever roleplay) as the best path to victory.

Rules and Roles

Gaming enthusiasts know this; but for the uninitiated, some further explanation is called for. Certain concepts are universal to the genre and present regardless of the rules. Or put another way, the concept of the game is the game, which highlights how little is needed to enjoy the hobby. All it takes is players having

agreed-upon roles, and anyone who's ever spent an hour of real time debating how to circumvent a flooded passageway should emphatically agree. Roles, not rolls, make a game go...

Someone opts to be the DELVER (or referee in wargaming parlance). Before any game can begin, they'll need to write the first adventure; typically, a dungeon or other underground area to explore, although town and wilderness scenarios are fun and highly encouraged. This comes complete with an assortment of monsters, deadly traps, and wondrous treasures, all of them the handiwork of the Delver, who acts the part of enemy monsters and other supporting (non-player) characters, whether a kindly innkeeper or notorious cutpurse plying their trade.

Everyone else becomes a PLAYER, each creating a unique fantasy character (commonly known as a player character) and equipping them for the adventures to come. Working together and combining their strength, they explore what the Delver has prepared and hopefully survive, winning great rewards or dying in heroic fashion. Of course, they're also tasked with acting out their characters and using good judgement, for the underworld is heartless to fools. Everything the Delver does is in service to the players, who come together as an adventuring party.

During a game, the Delver narrates what the characters see and experience while exploring their world, perhaps a horde of goblins barreling down a rough-hewn passage. The players, for their part, decide how their characters respond to this, whether through bloodshed or negotiation. Dice are rolled and the rules consulted, although the Delver is expected to resolve situations as they see fit, which might include special house rules or other innovations. Remember, this rulebook isn't a substitute for the Delver's imagination, especially with fun on the line.

One defining feature of roleplaying games is that each new session picks up where the last one left off as part of an ongoing

fantasy CAMPAIGN. Sadly, some won't make it this far, falling in battle or worse. This isn't a problem. No one wants to lose a character; but they can be replaced, assuming resurrection isn't a viable option. But those who survive gain valuable experience and improve, acquiring more powers and abilities that allow for bigger adventures ahead. One-off games are possible; but this overlooks one of the hobby's finest opportunities.

Action Dice

Risk and uncertainty are essential to any game, for heroism can't exist otherwise. Not knowing what lurks around the next corner is certainly part of this, but sometimes the game requires more. Can Brookleafe escape a killing trap? Does she survive a poisonous spider's bite? Dice create uncertainty, making failure an option and doling out victory or defeat with the precision of fate. These come in several types, the so-called polyhedral dice of gaming lore, allowing for varied outcomes:

4-sided (d4)   6-sided (d6)   8-sided (d8)
10-sided (d10) 12-sided (d12) 20-sided (d20)

Any dangerous and/or difficult action requires two regular six-sided dice, called ACTION DICE, checked against a target number set by the Delver. Others are used to calculate damage or any number of other important things. Fortunately, there's a convenient shorthand for this. When some action requires two six-sided dice, this is expressed as 2d6, where 2 is the number of dice rolled and 6 the type (shape) called for. This applies to everything else, being part of gaming's vernacular.

Adventuring and rolling dice are both physical acts, which helps players feel like they're doing something. Moreover, dice ensure objectivity, especially with lives on the line. The Delver has tremendous power to adjudicate situations and should use

it whenever possible. At the same time, an objective foundation makes some things easier to accept, which greatly improves the experience. This is a tough balancing act, although a rewarding one that's important to everyone's enjoyment.

In Miniature

Given the pastime's wargaming roots, it should come as no surprise that metal miniatures (25/28mm) are used to represent characters and monsters in combat. This brings clashes to vivid life and highlights the need for good strategy. When used, one inch on the tabletop equals 5' in the game's battlespace, by sight or using a vinyl mat (or similar product). The rules which follow offer more, but miniatures deserve mention up front.

After the Magic

Every game has its implied world, and Gaming Primitive is no exception. Myth-inspired, it has the hobby's quasi-medieval universe, complete with dragons and dark magic, although one best described as post-magical. Dwarves and elves, the ancient fey, are long vanished, leaving only time-faded remnants along with many of the same monsters troubling that former age. But magic isn't completely gone, for it lives on in those with traces of the old faerie blood for an unbroken legacy.

The first fantasy games were basically wargames; and while their simplicity was doubtless coincidental, it nonetheless gave rise to a unique style to play. One firmly rooted in wargaming's finest instincts. There's no gatekeeping here, and no wrong way to play; but gamers looking for something intuitive that doesn't mechanize too much may enjoy these rules. Still, it's important to remember that no book is ever more than a tool for creative people to have fun. Now welcome to Gaming Primitive...
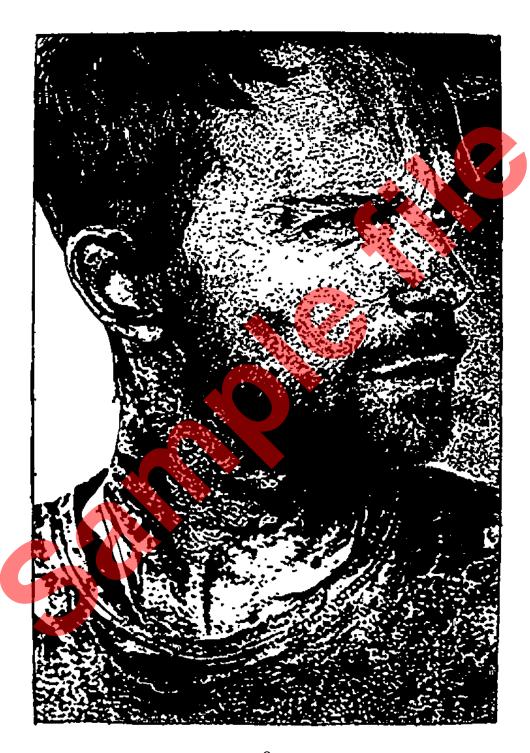
heroes

Player characters are the heroes and heroines of the story; and who wants to play a fantasy game without them? Dungeons go unexplored, evil monsters go unchecked, and the kingdom goes unsaved, none of which is heroic. That said, this chapter covers how to create these heroes and prepare them for the dangerous adventures ahead; for heroic fantasy demands more than mere strategy, it calls for larger-than-life personalities...

Historically grounded as it was, early roleplay emphasized ordinary people in extraordinary circumstances. Ambitious for sure, and equipped for the fight, but ordinary nonetheless. And what else would they be? Anyone seeking their fortune had no choice but to take up arms or maybe rely on stealth, for magic was limited. It couldn't last; but while it did, the pastime had its golden age free of the modern hobby's superheroes.

Gaming Primitive seals these years in amber. Again, there's nothing wrong with the modern iteration; but a faux-medieval world has its own charms. The village blacksmith leaves home

with his grandfather's chainmail coat and an iron spear he made himself. That's truly heroic. And when magic isn't an everyday occurrence, it's exciting when it happens. This collision of the magical and mundane makes both stand out in stark contrast to those campaigns having a wizard in every tower.

That said, player characters are humans, ordinary men and women who left home seeking blood and glory. But they aren't complete yokels either, with exceptional qualities (aspects) and special talents (boons) befitting a champion. Some of the latter are supernatural, owing to the fey blood coursing through their veins, for the ancient bloodlines live on in those rare persons having them. These characters may bear physical signs of their ancestry, although most will probably pass as human.

Aspects

Characters are talented. While they have weaknesses, they compensate well enough that it doesn't matter in the scheme of things. Mostly, they come across as average, although each has something special to give. Fast, strong, or wise, everyone brings exceptional ASPECTS to the adventuring table:

Aspect	Related Actions
Fast	Balance, coordination, stealth
Strong	Endurance, physical power
Wise	Charm, knowledge, personality

To make original characters, players begin with 3 points to divide between the above as they see fit based on their concept and desired attributes. Their score in each is likewise the bonus applied to dice for related actions such that Brookleafe, with a Fast of 2, adds +2 when balancing on a ledge, greatly improving her odds in a perilous situation. Aspects are one way for players to get the character they really want. Whether a knight or crafty

thief, the concept begins here, noting that a score of zero in any aspect doesn't make that character deficient.

Except for special behaviors reserved exclusively for boons and the like, characters may attempt a vast array of non-combat actions, every one driven by a governing aspect and entitled to its bonus. Whether sneaking past the city guard (Fast), bending bars to escape captivity if caught (Strong), or resorting to bribes when all else fails (Wise), such aspects define a character while keeping things simple in the spirit of the early days:

FAST denotes speed, balance, and coordination. Whether balancing on a narrow ledge or slipping past enemy guards, the agile can hide or sneak their way out of a jam.

STRONG implies fortitude and physical power capable of breaking chains and kicking down doors. When problems must be moved or physically endured, the robust deliver.

WISE suggests knowledge, from musty old tomes or off the streets, but likewise charm and duplicity, for certain challenges can only be met through guile or sweet words.

Fantasy games are imaginary. Everything takes place inside the participant's heads, so rolling dice is needed. Intelligence is something else, as the players are compelled to think and solve their own problems. That said, rolls are allowed when recalling details about the setting (which the players wouldn't reasonably know) or when attempting to cajole non-player characters into certain schemes. Problem solving can't be rolled for.

Boons and Gifts

Aspects count for a lot; but they aren't everything. Gaming Primitive is fantasy, meaning special abilities are called for. To this end, characters are gifted with two BOONS of the player's choice. Some are magical (betraying their faerie ancestry) while the rest are mundane, albeit heroic in nature. Each is meant to

give characters the larger-than-life reputation they deserve and helps each to stand out. A commoner's life isn't for them, being marked by fate and destined for great things:

Boon	Element	Ranks
Arcane	Magic	3
Berserker	Mundane	0
Chosen	Mundane	0
Fearsome	Mundane	0
Healer	Magic	3
Prophet	Magic	3
Rogue	Mundane	Unique
Skinchanger	Magic	3
Stalwart	Mundane	0
Unyielding	Magic	3

ELEMENT says something about where this power comes from. Magical boons always indicate faerie ancestry, whether a character knows it or not, while mundane stuff represents skills honed through training or the special gifts of some.

Characters can use most boons once per game day at a time of the player's choosing, with magical ones allowing additional uses, called RANKS, a mark of experience. These require skill points (explained later) to complete, which might seem to favor certain characters, but always at a cost. As the sole measure of advancement, those relying heavily on magic have fewer points to survive attacks or otherwise improve actions.

ARCANE. The character has magical talents, casting spells that duplicate any non-combat action perfectly without dice or other equipment normally associated with the task, much to the amazement of others. And because the effect is achieved using magic, it works immediately. Characters may attempt any spell for which there exists a non-sorcerous equivalent, noting that duration, range, and scope always approximate the same action