GURPS
Fourth Edition

FANTASY

By William H. Stoddard

STEVE JACKSON GAMES

# Are you looking for a good fantasy?

From ancient myths to popular films, tales of heroes and magic have captured the imagination. Now *GURPS Fantasy* offers roleplayers a comprehensive guide to the entire fantasy genre. Building on the flexible, streamlined *Fourth Edition* rules, it lets you develop a campaign to explore the world of your favorite book or film – or create a new one from your own dreams. The main emphasis is on historical fantasy, in settings from the Bronze Age to the Renaissance, but the principles apply to any fantasy setting, from the prehistoric past to the remote future.

But there's more here than theoretical guidelines and toolkits. You'll find examples of imaginary plants and animals, unique monsters, nonhuman races, occupations, spells, and enchanted objects, ready to use in your own campaign – or to use as models for inventing your own.

A complete campaign setting, Roma Arcana, is ready to use in your own game. It can stand on its own, or fit into the Infinite Worlds background from *GURPS Fourth Edition.* Send a band of adventurers on impossible missions in a magical Roman Empire, as they struggle to win honor and hold back the darkness.

You'll find help in running your campaign here, in Roma Arcana or any other setting: advice on creating balanced parties, devising scenarios to challenge them, and using the game rules to achieve dramatic effects.

Take the most flexible, most consistent RPG system there is, and use it to run the campaign you dream of.
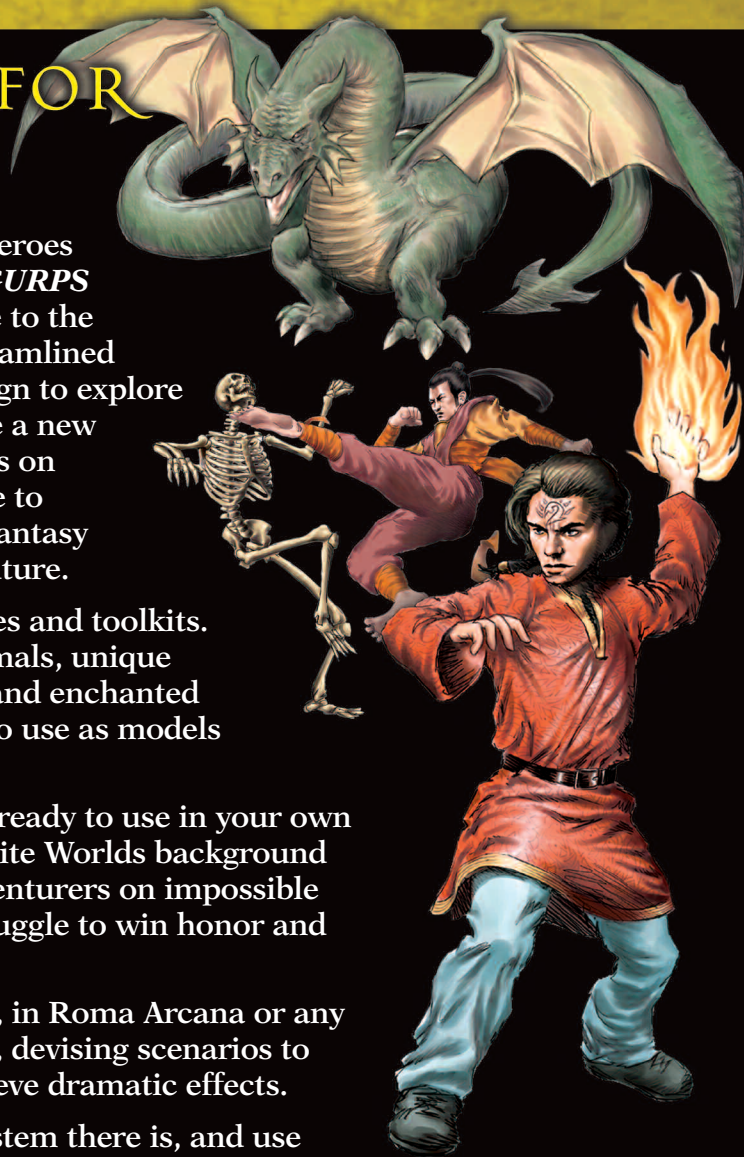
*GURPS Fantasy requires the GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition. The information and ideas here will work with **any** fantasy game.*

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INTRODUCTION

Fantasy is the realm of the imagination. If a fantasy writer wants to tell stories about dragons, wizards, or fairy kingdoms, he doesn't need historical documentation or scientific explanations – he can just imagine them. This gives writers more freedom than any other genre.

But "more freedom" doesn't mean *unlimited* freedom. The reader has to believe that the characters and events are possible *in the world of the story*. A fantasy world with its own logic – what critics call the *inner consistency of reality* – yields more interesting stories than a world where anything can happen.

In roleplaying games, one source of that consistency is the rules system. A good set of rules isn't a barrier to the GM's imagination . . . it's a tool for making everything he imagines hold together. *GURPS Fantasy* shows how to run the fantasy campaign you really want.

A great resource for creating fantasy comes from the legends, myths, and folklore of the past. Everyone knows about dragons, so readers and players are already halfway to believing in them. *GURPS Fantasy* describes many legendary beings, creatures, and objects, and gives advice on using *GURPS* for your own fantasies.

The final chapter puts it all together in a new fantasy setting, Roma Arcana, based on the legends of ancient Rome in its darkest and most exciting time. If you want to start a new campaign in a familiar but exotic setting, Roma Arcana is ready to play. If you're using the Infinite Worlds framework from the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*, you can fit Roma Arcana into it as an alternative history, at once familiar and weird. And if you'd like to design your own original world, Roma Arcana is a model you can follow.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

William H. Stoddard is a freelance writer and editor living in San Diego, California, in an apartment crammed with books. He was introduced to RPGs in 1975 and has played them ever since. His main other hobby is research; new game books give him an excuse for even more library visits than he would make anyway. His previous work for Steve Jackson Games includes *GURPS Steampunk* and four other books, as sole or co-author, as well as contributions to numerous other books.

He dedicates this book to the memory of Felon, *felis optimus maximusque,* who supervised the writing of its earlier drafts.

About *GURPS*

Steve Jackson Games is committed to full support of *GURPS* players. We can be reached by email: **info@sjgames.com**. Our address is SJ Games, P.O. Box 18957, Austin, TX 78760. Resources include:

New supplements and adventures. GURPS continues to grow – see what's new at **gurps.sjgames.com**.

Warehouse 23. Our online store offers *GURPS* print items, plus PDFs of our books, supplements, adventures, play aids, and support . . . including exclusive material available only on Warehouse 23! Just head over to **warehouse23.com**.

Pyramid (**pyramid.sjgames.com**). For 10 years, our PDF magazine *Pyramid* included new rules and articles for *GURPS,* plus systemless locations, adventures, and much more. The entire 122-issue library is available at Warehouse 23!

Internet. To discuss *GURPS* with our staff and your fellow gamers, visit our forums at **forums.sjgames.com.** You can also join us at **facebook.com/sjgames** or **twitter.com/sjgames**.

Share your brief campaign teasers with #GURPShook on Twitter. Or explore that hashtag for ideas to add to your own game! The *GURPS Fantasy* web page is **gurps.sjgames.com/books/fantasy**.

Store Finder (**storefinder.sjgames.com**): Discover nearby places to buy *GURPS* items and other Steve Jackson Games products. Local shops are great places to play our games and meet fellow gamers!

Bibliographies. Bibliographies are a great resource for finding more of what you love! We've added them to many *GURPS* book web pages, with links to help you find the next perfect element for your game.

Errata. Everyone makes mistakes, including us – but we do our best to fix our errors. Errata pages for *GURPS* releases are at **sjgames.com/errata/gurps**.

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*. Page references that begin with B refer to that book, not this one.

CHAPTER ONE
PLANNING THE CAMPAIGN

And, as imagination bodies forth
The forms of things unknown, the poet's pen
Turns them to shapes, and gives to airy nothing
A local habitation and a name.
– William Shakespeare,
A Midsummer Night's Dream

David Rhys brushed carefully at the unearthed clay tablet. Its surface was hard, as if it had been fired, but he didn't want to risk damaging the cuneiform inscription. The words were Hittite, but in some peculiar dialect, archaic or simply early. There was something about ". . . that which defeats the sorcerer . . ."

"Professor!"

Moving with exaggerated slow care, he turned partway toward the ladder that Andrew Jenkins had just descended. "Have you found something?" he asked.

"Rose said I should ask you to have a look. It's some sort of forge, she thinks, and there's some sort of sword there. It looks rusted, so it might be iron."

Rhys said, "I'll be there in a minute. I have to get this tablet properly packed. Tell her to wait for me."

Fantasy occupies the middle ground between history and myth. History attempts to describe what actually happened. Realistic fiction is as close to history as possible; it may not have actually happened, but the reader believes its events *could have* happened. Myth attempts to describe what captures the imagination; a good story creates its own sense of truth. Fantasy has elements from both. Its heroes escape the limits of human existence. Their actions and their abilities can be larger than life. And they face challenges and perils that are also larger than life.

Most of the preparation for a fantasy campaign goes into the development of the setting. However, the setting exists for the sake of the campaign. It's much easier to decide what to include after deciding what kind of campaign it needs to support. This applies to all kinds of gaming, but especially to fantasy. A fantasy campaign offers a wider range of possibilities; narrowing them down takes more work.

This chapter explores the different fantasy campaigns by considering three categories: genre, setting, and scope. If you're basing a campaign on a favorite book or film, these definitions of genre and setting can help you bring it into clearer focus.
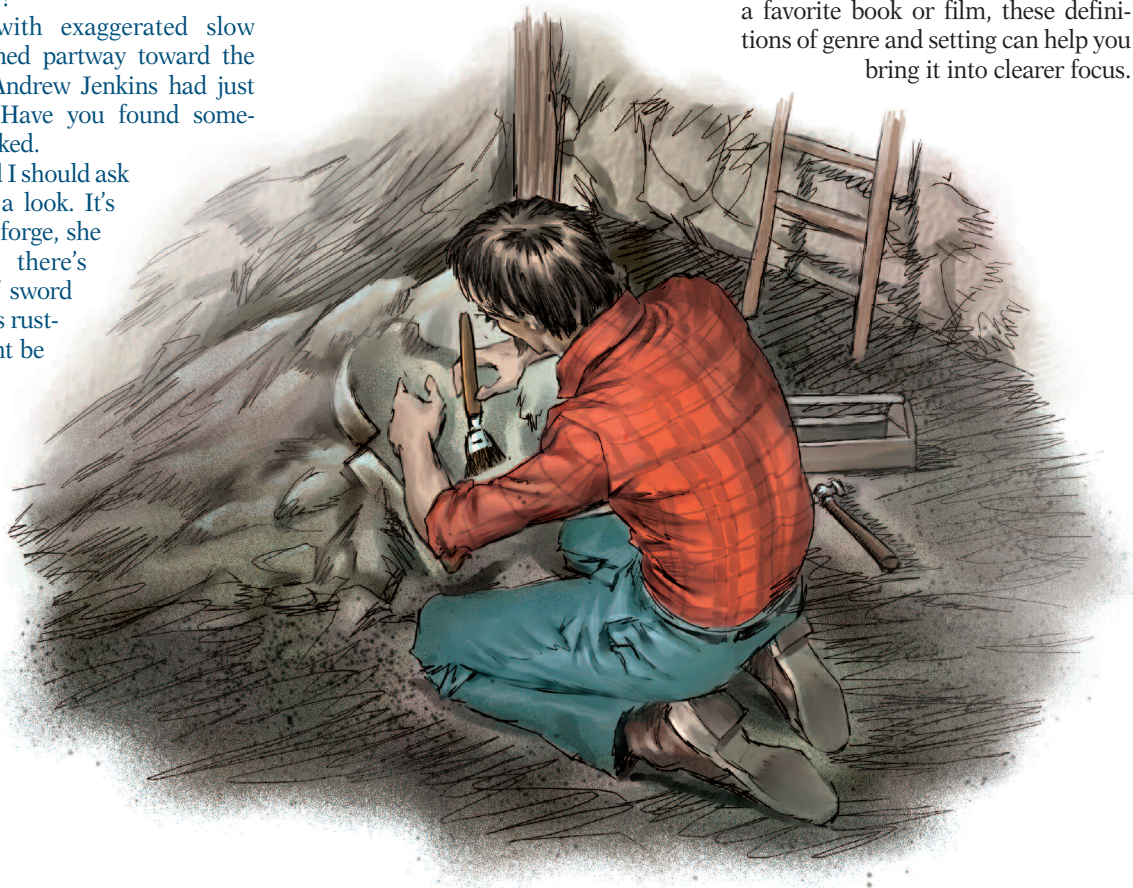
GENRES

Genre is a way of predicting what people will like. If two stories (or two campaigns) are in the same genre, people who enjoy one will usually enjoy the other. Each genre has its own audience, typical challenges for characters to face, and certain backgrounds for the action. Each genre also emphasizes certain emotions and moods.

Few stories are pure examples of any *one* genre; some have elements from *all* of them. The same is true of campaigns. Statements about genres are guidelines, not unbreakable rules. Genre definitions can help suggest things to include in a campaign to get the effect you want.

HIGH FANTASY

If fantasy occupies the middle ground between myth and history, high fantasy is closer to myth.

Myths are about gods; high fantasy is about demigods, heroic warriors, and powerful magicians. But there's more to it than that. In a high fantasy campaign, the power level is a means to create wonder and amazement.

Magic should still evoke this wonder. For thousands of years, myths and folktales made flying a symbol of power. The gods lived in heaven and flew down to earth, or sent winged messengers on errands. Sorcerers wove flying carpets, and cunning inventors made artificial wings. Now, millions of people fly all over the world – and it's not much more exciting than taking the bus. Routine use can turn anything from a wonder into a convenience. If magic, especially powerful magic, is common and reliable, then it's just another technology; it won't *feel* mythic.

Several things help keep magic amazing. First, distribute it unevenly. Intensely magical events stand out more if they contrast with a less magical background. Second, stress its unpredictability, even to people who use it regularly. Third, if possible, make some magic unknown – not just to the protagonists, but to everyone . . . perhaps even the gods.

Characters in a high fantasy setting may encounter true powers of the world – gods or other mythic beings. Often, these encounters will be conversations instead of battles. Facing mythic foes in combat should frighten even the most capable adventurers. However, attracting such beings' attention raises the heroes above ordinary mortals. Gods may single out the greatest or worthiest mortals as their champions, or even as potential future recruits to godhood – or as problems to remove before they ascend to real power.

Godhood is more than a name. It is a condition of being . . . Being a god is the quality of being able to be yourself to such an extent that your passions correspond with the forces of the universe, so that those who look upon you know this without hearing your name spoken. . . . One rules through one's ruling passion. Those who look upon gods then say, without even knowing their names, "He is Fire. She is Dance. He is Destruction. She is Love."
– Roger Zelazny, **Lord of Light**

LOW FANTASY

Low fantasy is closer to realistic fiction than to myth. Low fantasy stories focus on people's daily lives and practical goals; magic provides a way to achieve those goals, and makes it interesting. A low fantasy campaign asks what it's like to live in a world of monsters, magic, and demigods.

Most low fantasy magic is evenly distributed in the world, not sharply focused in certain places. Its effects are predictable and knowable. Low fantasy magic is less a source of wonder than a toolkit.

Characters in low fantasy are more concerned with practical goals, less with great passions. A high fantasy traitor might be motivated by passionate jealousy, tempted by the devil, or perversely sympathetic to

Myths and Games

If fantasy falls between history and myth, then where does myth fall? If it's possible to run a fantasy campaign, is it possible to run a mythic campaign? It depends on the myth.

Some myths are much like adventure stories. In Norse legend, Thor and Loki go to Jotunheim, the land of the frost giants, and have adventures there. For example, they visit a giant's house and engage in sporting competitions with its residents. This could be an episode in a roleplaying campaign, especially if the players like a touch of comedy.

During one of the contests, Thor tries to empty a drinking horn that's magically linked to the ocean, and drinks so much that he causes the first tides. Action on this scale is beyond the scope of any spells, enchantments, or powers in most fantasy games.

Characters in myths are personifications of cosmic forces. Stories that emphasize this personification are often adventure stories, love stories, or murder mysteries, and can turn into game scenarios. However, the cosmic forces inspire other kinds of stories – stories that explain the world's origin, prophesy its end, or express horror at its inhuman vastness.

Nothing prevents cosmic forces from entering a game. But they're usually best presented through pure storytelling (see *Mythology,* pp. 76-77, for some suitable stories), not through rules. The powers of mythic beings are never fully measured, nor their motives fully understood.

the other side; a low fantasy traitor wants 30 pieces of silver. Merchants and criminals are minor figures, or entirely absent, in most high fantasy. In low fantasy, they are not only prevalent, they may be the heroes.

DARK FANTASY

Dark fantasy borrows the mood of horror. It portrays magic as ominous . . . more likely to harm than help. Supernatural beings are powerful and indifferent to human concerns, if not outright malevolent; their attention is feared, not sought. Remember the ancient custom of talking about "the fair folk" (faeries) or "the kindly ones" (the Furies of Greek myth) to avoid giving offense. Any use of magic, even for virtuous purposes, should have a price.

The elaborate mythologies that underlie much high fantasy also form an essential element in dark fantasy – but in dark fantasy, most people may not even have heard of them. In the darkest settings, the ultimate truth may be *maltheistic* (p. 32), and the heroes may be doomed to struggle hopelessly against evil and horror.

A great theme in dark fantasy is the hero's sacrifice. This may be his life, willingly given to kill a foe or close the gates of hell; wounds and scars that will never heal; madness; or his own corruption by using evil to defeat worse evil. He faces constant fear – not only for himself, but also for the people he defends. Dark fantasies often end in tragedy. Their heroes have appropriate traits, from tragic character flaws to curses or unhappy destinies.

LIGHT FANTASY

Where dark fantasy is full of grim consequences, light fantasy avoids them. Its goal is to amuse the audience (or the players). Inspirations for this kind of fantasy include Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, with its faeries playing tricks on mortals, and fairy tales with happy endings. Dark fantasies are often tragedies; light fantasies are usually comedies.

Naturally, characters in light fantasy have to face problems and threats along the way. These threats usually aren't lethal or irreversible. If the heroes get turned into something icky, there will be a way to turn them back. If they face a monster, it will have some unexpected weakness. Many light fantasy plots deal with complications instead of threats; for example, a heroine may have to find odd magical ingredients to free the hero from a spell.

Spells in light fantasy always risk going wrong in unexpected ways. Supernatural beings are eccentric or tricky, controlled by peculiar rules that give clever mortals ways to get the better of them. Learning their names (see *True Names*, p. 14) is a classic example, as in the fairy tale "Rumpelstiltskin." The same theme shows up in stories about wishes going wrong, or about making bargains with the Devil and wriggling out at the last minute.

In some ways, light fantasy relates to low fantasy. Putting everyday people and practical problems together with mythical beings and powerful magic is a natural source of humorous incongruities.

On the other hand, some light fantasy comes closer to high fantasy. Stories influenced by classic swashbuckling adventure, such as Steven Brust's *The Phoenix Guards*, have heroes who face real danger, but take it lightly, or even welcome it out of a sense of personal honor.

SWORD AND SORCERY

The focus of sword and sorcery is adventure, and the mood it produces is excitement. The settings for sword and sorcery campaigns allow as much adventuring as possible. Well-organized civilizations are rare. Empty lands roamed by barbarian nomads, corrupt and decadent city-states, or the haunted ruins of earlier civilizations offer more entertainment – and have fewer inconvenient laws. Backgrounds for sword and sorcery are often just quick sketches. Elaborate worldbuilding isn't the point of this genre; what matters is that there are armies to conquer, monsters to slay, and ruins to loot.

Classic sword and sorcery usually makes the swordsmen the main heroes. Sorcerers might be threats to the hero or the people he protects, as in Robert E. Howard's Conan series and C.L. Moore's Jirel of Joiry stories. Or they might be the heroes' mentors and patrons, as in Fritz Leiber's tales of Lankhmar. More recent sword and sorcery often has heroes who can work magic. They may be equally skilled at nonmagical combat, or belong to teams of adventurers where some members provide the swords and others the sorcery. Adventurer teams have been the basis of most fantasy roleplaying, all the way back to the original ***Dungeons & Dragons***.

Magic for adventurers has to be fast, largely designed for combat effectiveness. The wizard adventurer isn't a scholarly recluse or a clever trickster, but a human artillery weapon. Or, if his powers are subtler, he needs nonmagical combat skills to keep himself alive. Either approach avoids scenes where everyone else fights and the wizard takes cover and waits for the battle to end.

Sword and sorcery can resemble any other genre, but focuses mainly on action and combat. The sword-and-sorcery version of high fantasy features impressive spells, epic heroes, and battles that decide the fate of kingdoms. The dark version is full of evil sorcery and terrifying monsters. The low version often sends adventurers into gritty urban environments to contend with thieves' and assassins' guilds or corrupt priests and aristocrats. In light sword and sorcery, the heroes have to deal with flashy rivals and their own bad judgment. A campaign focused on adventure can be in any of these styles.

ON THE BORDERS

A number of other genres have some kinship to fantasy. Some have clearly fantastic elements, but aren't usually classified as fantasy and may appeal to different audiences. Others appeal to fantasy audiences and are classified as fantasy, but lack one or more typical elements.

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