



LAND OF SHADOWS

An Epic Fantasy Genre 'Plug-in' for OSE



DESIGNED FOR USE WITH

**OLD-SCHOOL
ESSENTIALS**

By Mark Kernow

Land of Shadows

EPIC FANTASY FOR OSE

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BY JCH FROM
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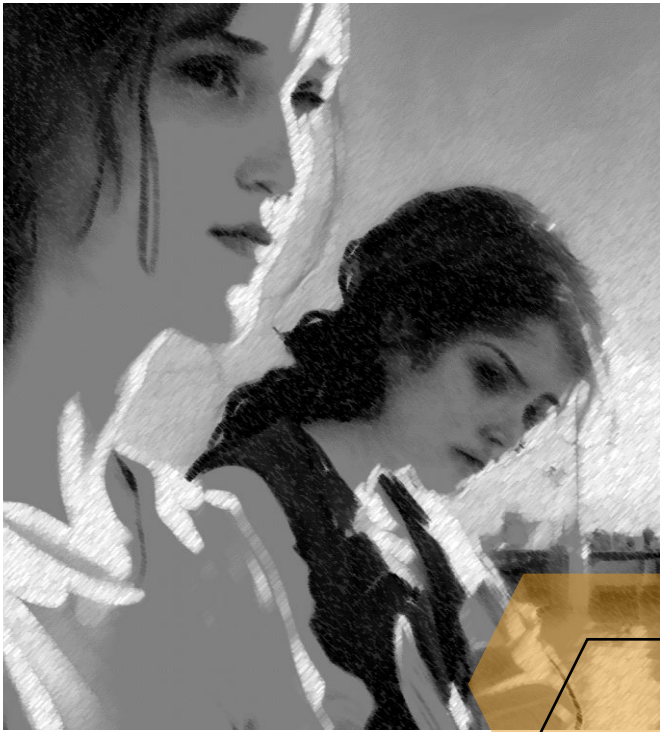
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7 TRUTHS OF EPIC FANTASY

A TYPICAL CAMPAIGN WILL INCLUDE SOME OF THESE ELEMENTS:

- **A quest against the odds.** Although they may not know it at first, Players Characters are already involved in a larger conflict, in which they will likely play a pivotal role.
- **A journey across vast distance,** past terrible danger. For this, it is recommended that Referees use the existing *Wilderness Adventuring* and *Encounter* tables in OSE.
- **Good versus Evil.** There are plenty of moral dilemmas, shifts in morality and viewpoint, but these are part of a setting where absolute good and absolute evil exist. In the case of evil this is often personified as a single great Enemy or Adversary.
- **A historied and fallen world.** The world has undergone many changes over vast stretches of time, much of what was known or great is now lost, and the party moves amongst the ruins.
- **It falls to us, unlikely heroes.** The heroes of the past are gone, so it is up to a new generation to take up their arms and discover their courage and resilience.
- **Magic is leaving the world.** Common folk have no experience of magic, and spellcasters and magical items are rare and disappearing into myth.
- **Tragedy, beauty, and a sense of melancholy.** Places and people of true beauty and wonder still linger in the world, although being in their presence is linked to a sadness that their time is limited.

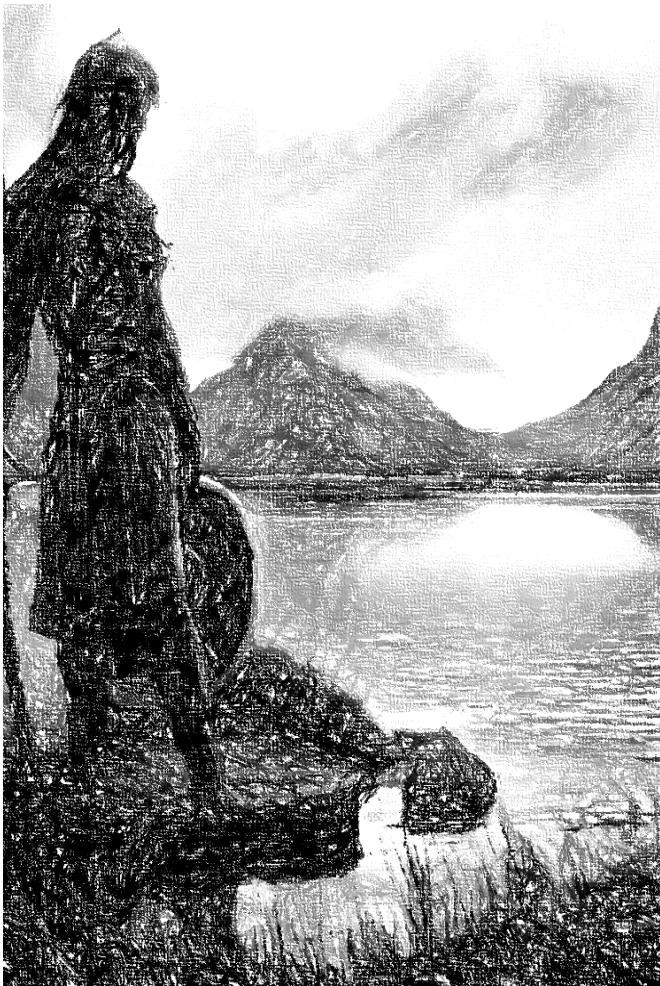


UNLIKELY HEROES

OPTIONS FOR CHARACTER GENERATION

They don't know it yet, but your new player characters (PCs) have within them the stuff of greatness. They may look ordinary, but they are just that bit tougher, that bit harder, ready to be tested against the machinations of the Enemy.

- It is recommended that PCs are created using rolls of 4d6 for ability scores, dropping the lowest die in each case, and arranging the scores as desired.
- Once each PC has their final ability score for Constitution determined, take half that value, rounding up, and add it to their starting hit points.



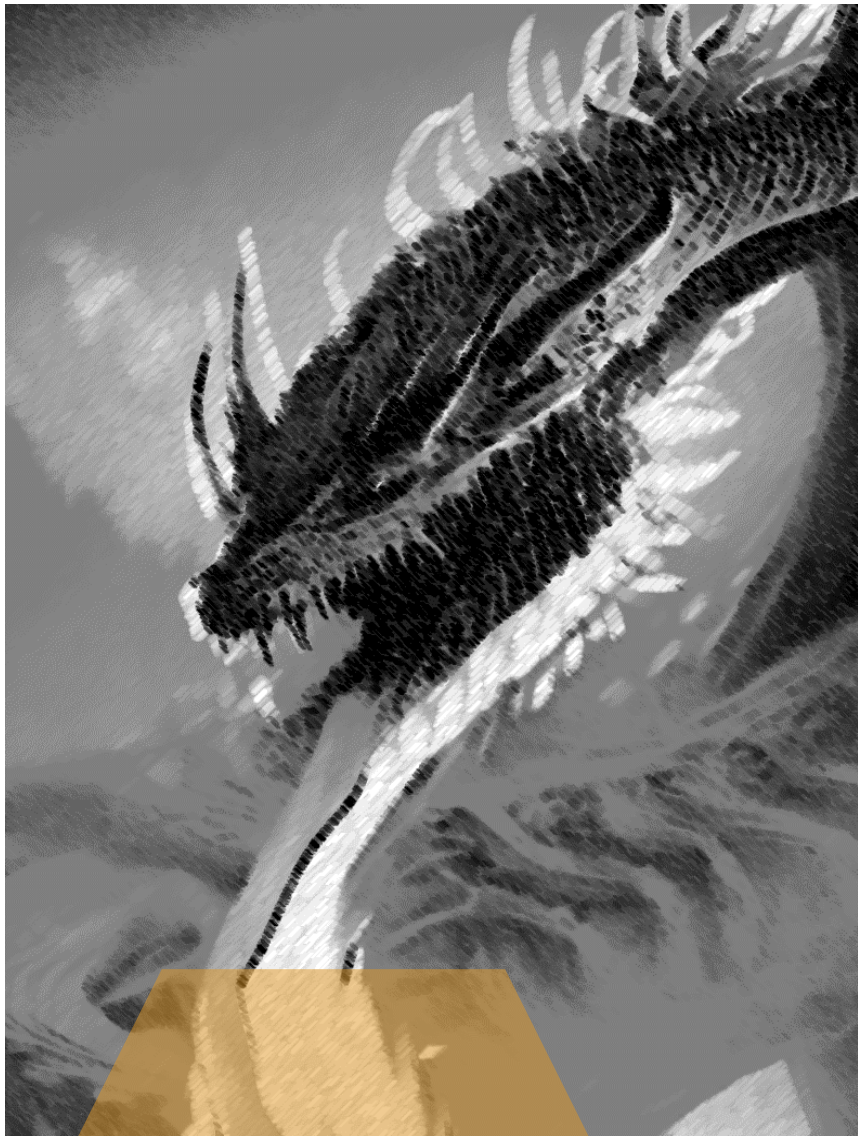
HARDER TO KILL

Player characters who are reduced to zero hit points (hp) or below are no longer active participants in the scene or encounter, take no actions and fall prone on the nearest surface.

If another party member is then able to move adjacent to them, then a **Save versus Death** can be made at that moment.

If successful on their Save versus Death, a player character is unconscious on 0 hp and gains a **Wound** (see Wounds below). Wounds and hp can then be healed in the usual manner. If the Death save is failed, the character is dead, and can only be returned to life by powerful spells such as Raise Dead, if these are permitted in the game.

If it isn't possible for the party to get to a character, for example if they have to retreat, or if the character has fallen off a cliff, then it is possible for the character to make an **Unexpected Return** (see below).



UNEXPECTED RETURNS

An Unexpected Return occurs when a character is left behind by the party on zero hp. At the start of the next session (or earlier if a suitable opportunity occurs), the player makes a Save versus Death for their character. If successful, the PC is reunited with the party by unlikely circumstance, on half hp. In this case, they miraculously appear to have taken no Wound from their ordeal.

WOUNDS

These occur when a player character or a **Named Villain** (see below) are reduced to zero hit points but make a successful Save versus Death. Subtract 1d6 from a random physical ability score and recalculate the ability modifier(s) accordingly. It is possible for a character to acquire more than one Wound, with the effects being cumulative.

Each Wound persists until cured by magical healing, healing herbs (see **Extra Healing** below) or 1d4 days of bed rest. Wounds can be removed via magical spells such as Cure Wounds, but in this case, a choice must be made between hit point recovery or Wound removal, the same spell cannot do both. A 1st level healing spell removes a single Wound, but a higher level spell such as Cure Serious Wounds removes all Wounds. At the Referee's option, a reversed healing spell can cause one or more Wounds as an alternative to damaging hit points.

Wounds caused by **Evil Magic Items** (see below) also reduce rolls for Saving Throws by 1d4, but in all cases a roll of 20 is still considered a success.

EXTRA HEALING

The Referee may wish to include the following options for additional healing, especially if the party does not contain a healer or if a Cleric is not available as a playable character class option. This extra healing should provide either 1d4 or 1d6 of hit point recovery per instance or use, depending on the strength of the effect, with more powerful effects also able to heal **Wounds** (see above).

- Magical food or drink such as Elf Bread or Dwarven Ale (1d4 hp per PC per meal)
- Healing herbs and hands (1d6 per use per day, assuming a skillful practitioner)
- Restful glades and waters (1d6 hp recovery for all, once a day, also removes a Wound).

WORDS OF POWER

Player Characters of any class or race can make use of special forms of words to cause a game effect. Words of Power can take the form of:

- **Boasts** of the indomitable nature of the forces of good.
- **Calling a doom** down on an opponent.
- **Invoking the name** of a powerful being of good.
- **Swearing an Oath** to act or take on an obligation.
- **Praising the beauty or wisdom** of another, living or dead.

In all cases, the effect of uttering such words is the same. The character roll 1d4 and the result is a positive bonus that can be applied to one or more rolls within the game, such as Attack hit rolls or Saves. Not all the bonus needs to be applied to the same roll, it can be split across several rolls, with a minimum of +1 being applied to each roll. The bonus can also be applied to the rolls of other party members or allied creatures. This simulates the positive morale boost that the use of the Words give to those fighting evil. (Please note that if an oath is sworn it is considered binding on the character who uttered it, and can only be broken at great social cost, as determined by the Referee). The use of Word of Power also triggers the effect of the **Eye and Hand of the Enemy** (see below). Words of power lose their significance if they are uttered more than once a day.

DARK PLACES AND OTHER VILLAINY

DARK PLACES

Sometimes in Epic Fantasy, the concentrated presence of Evil has a warping effect on the environment around it. In those cases, a **Dark Place** springs into being. The evil nature of a Dark Place is obvious to all who enter it and should be reflected in its description - the signs, the sounds, the atmosphere of the air itself reflects its grisly heritage. Beyond this clear warning to outsiders, there are other effects present in a Dark Place:

- Lights fade – all light ranges from torches, lanterns etc. are halved. Any unguarded flames brought into a Dark Place gutter and go out, and are not able to be relit for 1d4 rounds.
- On entering a Dark Place, all lawful or neutral aligned characters must make a Save versus Spells. On a failure, they act as Surprised for the duration of their stay in the location, losing initiative in combat and the ability to evade foes.
- It is hard to escape from a Dark Place, what limited exits exist tend to be blocked by creatures and obstacles.

It is however possible to counter some of these effects. Magical light is unaffected and grants a new Save versus Spells to overcome Surprise. **Words of Power** (see earlier) also counter the Surprise effect.

NAMED VILLAINS

Some of the non-player characters in the game are more than mere wild creatures or minions of the Enemy. These are **Named Villains**, and they possess some of the same features as Player Characters. A Named Villain is granted all the following:

- They get a Save versus Death at zero hit points, the same as a PC. Correspondingly they can also suffer Wounds and can make Unexpected Returns, although in their case they will normally reappear within 1-4 game sessions to challenge the party again.
- If the optional rule for Monster morale is in use, then Named Villains always have a Morale Rating (MR) of 12 and are therefore not subject to Morale Checks. Further, any allies within 30 feet of the Named Villain are granted a +1 bonus to their MR.
- If a Named Villain is reduced to 0 hp, any hirelings, retainers, mercenaries, or other allies present or nearby will always attempt to retrieve them.
- Some Named Villains possess **Evil Magic Items** and can utilize the effects of such items, for example to cause Magical Wounds to PCs that reduce their rolls for Saves (see Evil Magic Items).

EVIL MAGIC ITEMS

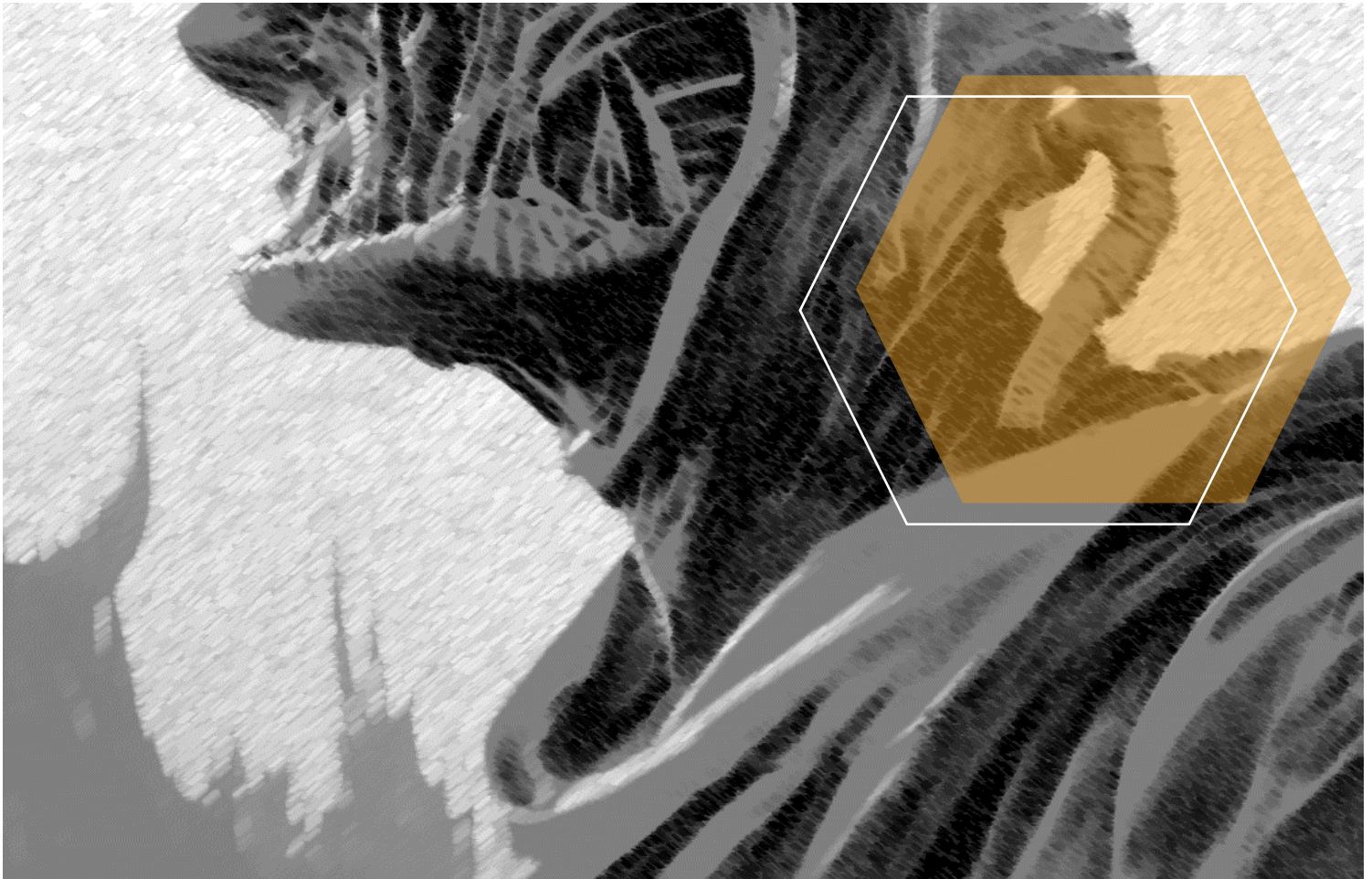
Any existing magic item can be designated as an **Evil Magic Item**. This grants it some extra properties as set out below:

- Any use (as opposed to possession) of an Evil Magic Item immediately moves its bearer's alignment one place away from Law and towards Chaos in respect to any game effects such as spells or items that make use of alignment. So Lawful characters or monsters are treated as Neutral, Neutral as Chaotic, with respect to Spells such as Protection from Evil, etc. The actual behavior of the affected character or monster however does not straightaway shift to reflect this change. Instead, they are granted a Save versus Spells the following day to resist this effect. If successful, their alignment reverts to what it was before the use of the item with no further effects. If they fail, the new alignment takes hold and their behavior and beliefs begin to alter to match it.
- Use of an Evil Magic Item also triggers the **Eye and Hand of the Enemy** effect (set out below).
- Any sentient Evil Magic Item is automatically Chaotic in alignment.
- An Evil Magic Item causes a Magical Wound, if such an item is used to reduce a character to zero hit points. As well as their normal effect, Magical Wounds caused by **Evil Magic Items** reduce rolls for Saving Throws by 1d4, but in all cases a roll of 20 is still considered a success.

EYE AND HAND OF THE ENEMY

Evil within the setting of the game is not directionless or random. It is always assumed that the Enemy is searching for the player characters and trying to influence events. Use of an Evil Magic Item, or speaking of Words of Power can focus the attentions of evil upon the party, as follows:

- The character using the item or speaking the words immediately makes a Save versus Spells.
- On a failure, for the next hour of play any additional monster newly encountered by the party takes a -4 penalty to its Monster Reaction roll, so for example a roll of 6 (uncertain) becomes 2 (hostile).
- In addition, for the next day, the chance of wandering monsters increases by 1 in 6.



DESIGNER NOTES

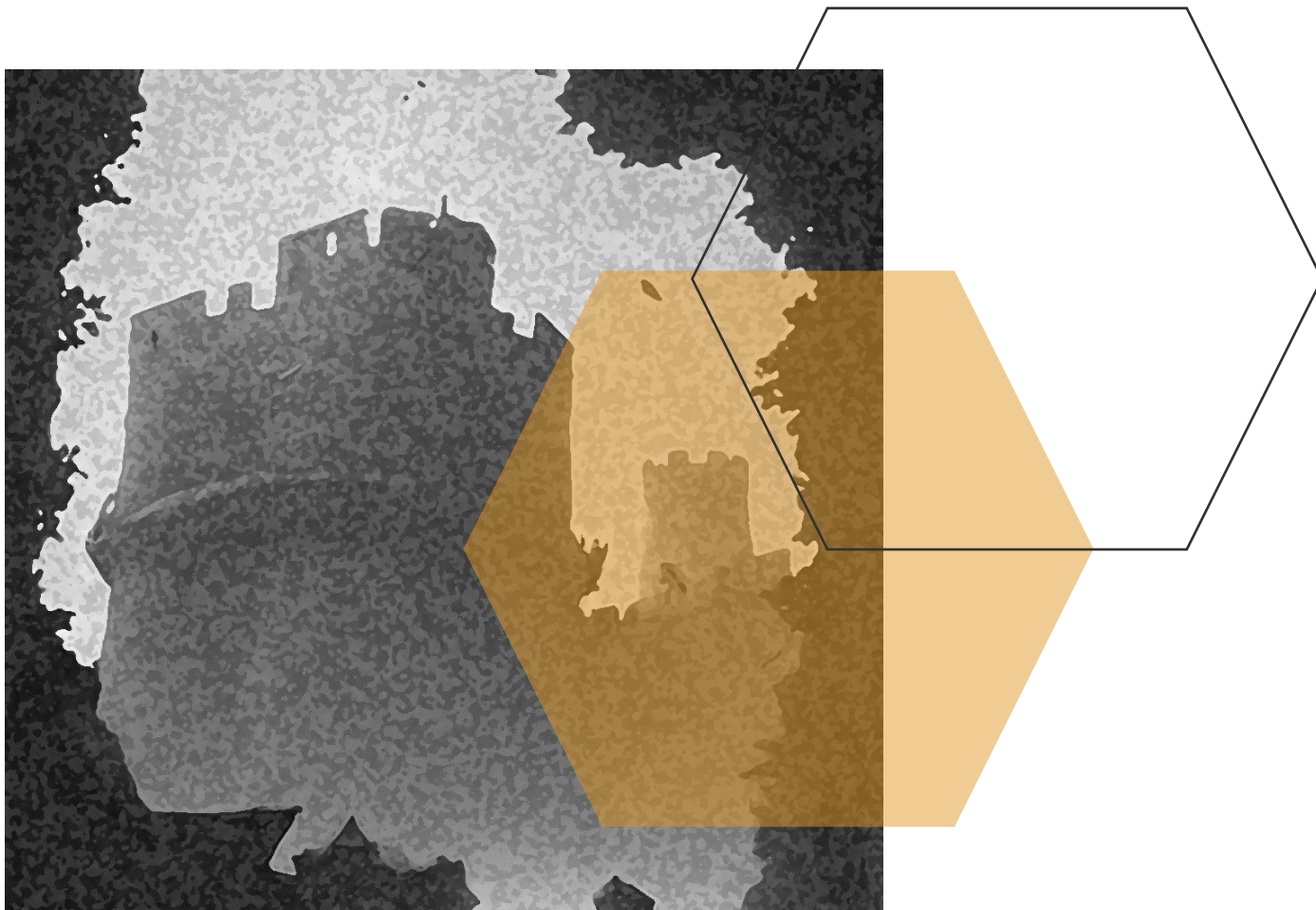
LESS IS MORE

Sword and Sorcery and its associated Weird Fantasy are rightly very popular genres within Old School gaming circles. But there is another style of play which began to emerge almost as soon as Gygax first put pen to paper for the world's oldest roleplaying game. That style is Epic Fantasy, as exemplified by the works of J.R.R. Tolkien and others. And that heritage is baked right into descendant games like Old School Essentials, Swords and Wizardry and many other popular Old School retroclones. So we don't have to look far for suitable demi-human races, appropriate monsters such as Orcs, Wargs, or Treants, or magical swords, armor and rings. They were there from the start.

The Old School is also blessed with a more than adequate system in hexcrawling to adjudicate perilous journeys, another popular staple of Epic Fantasy. The challenge then as a designer is less about what to add to better emulate the tropes of Epic Fantasy as to what to leave out. For example, other crunchier game systems have added in complicated rules for seeking audiences with important non-player characters, but the OSR to my mind has always had the best solution to working through social encounters – simply put, roleplay them out!

So what is presented here is a more minimal approach better suited to Old School sensibilities, intended to add a bit of genre-appropriate flavour without moving too far away from the classic game. To avoid doubt, let me state here clearly – if you don't like anything in these pages, leave it out of your game, it is all optional. Adding a few extra hit points to beginning characters and granting them a single Save Versus Death when they reach zero hit points is intended to help their survivability, but it isn't going to turn them into 5e style superheroes. I know this because (whisper it) some of us have been playing the classic game this way for a very long time. Unexpected Returns, Words of Power and the suggestions for Dark Places have all got solid precedents in the fiction that inspired them, and I hope you have fun with these and the other minor additions to the game. I commend them to you, give them a try and let me know what happens!

MARK KERNOW, AUTUMN 2022.



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