

G U R P S

Dragons™



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STEVE JACKSON GAMES

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PLAYING
WITH FIRE

*And the wild beasts of the islands
shall cry in their desolate houses, and
dragons in their pleasant palaces . . .
– Isaiah 13:22*



Breathing life into the fire-spouting lizard, beyond a few simple stereotypes and a liking for fresh meat, is a challenge for both players and GMs. How do dragons feed? Where do they live? Do they meet,

and if so, where? How does a creature that could live for centuries amuse itself, or relate to humanity? Finally, can this topic be interesting and varied enough to build a whole campaign around the subject?

Peasant Heroes

When a rampaging monster oppresses the peasantry, or the aristocracy and professional warriors have demonstrated that they are not up to the job, a hero can step forth from the common people (or volunteer from the condemned cell). Sometimes his luck or skill matches his confidence.

Peasant heroes lean more on cleverness and trickery than other monster slayers. Ambushes, traps, and poison all appear in legends and folklore, and usually work. The dragons in these tales are animalistic, and low-intelligence. Even the ones that talk may fall for the fluent verbal trickery of a smart rustic, and will usually eat something unwise. Sometimes these tales end with the dragon's poison blood or splattered venom killing the unfortunate hero shortly after the battle.

Knights in Shining Armor

Dragon myths mostly build *archetypes*, so the slayers are often trained specialists with good equipment and nice manners. Noble warriors tackle dragons and monsters in Greek, Persian, and Northern European myths, with similar success. Some heroes, like St. George, are also deeply pious, and the tale becomes a religious parable as much as an action story. But other dragon-slaying knights are simply good fighters.

If the knight charged home on horseback with couched lance, it could certainly do a *lot* of damage. However, the knight would need a reliable warhorse willing to charge in close to a huge, fire-breathing carnivore, and even after the charge, the dragon could still be standing. The hero often ends up on foot, hacking the beast to death with a heavy blade. Truly epic fights go on for hours or days. Even allowing for poetic exaggeration, heroes should have high degrees of fitness and reserves of fatigue.

Armies

Monsters could be taken down by sheer force of numbers. This gets messy; the creature will probably chew through much of the rank and file before blood loss and lucky shots finally kill

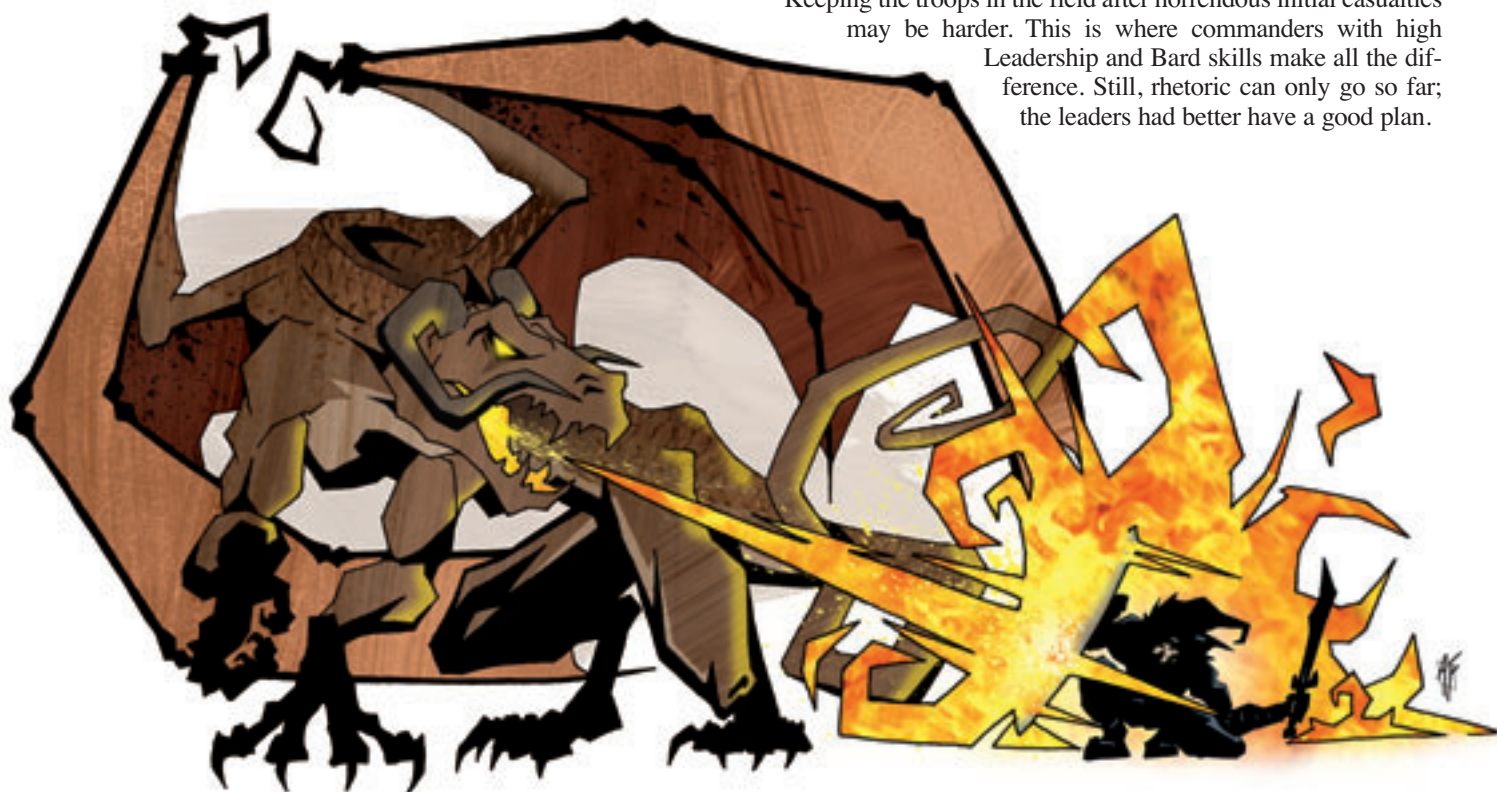
The Significance of Slaying

If dragons are special – more than just big, tough monsters – then killing one makes you significant, too. Conventionally, heroes who kill dragons are destined for greatness. Perseus (p. 9) was a son of Zeus, while Siegfried (p. 12) became the central figure of a great story-cycle. In many Christian tales, only saints could defeat dragons. Presumably, dragons were transcendently evil, only countered by supreme virtue. Several English towns and villages have traditional stories in which a terrible wyrm was slain by a knight who then founded a leading local family (possibly developed as explanations of the mythical beasts on the local lords' coat of arms, or of some odd place name). Similarly, in tales such as Tolkien's *The Hobbit*, killing a dragon is a quick way to become a ruler.

Incorporating this principle into RPGs may be hard, although it should serve as a reminder that dragons are special, only deployed by a GM needing a memorable fight scene. However, if one PC has the *Destiny* advantage, a GM could maneuver that character into the starring role, even if dragon-slaying is not his *Destiny* in itself. Likewise, a *Reputation* as a dragon-slayer (merited or not) is often good for a +2 or better reactions.

it off. If the dragon's resilience lies more in soaking up damage than in bouncing it off invulnerable scales (in *GURPS* terms, lots of hit points instead of high DR), the mass assault may work. Also, if it is only vulnerable to lucky shots to a small weak point (p. 71), having plenty of people attacking means that chance should eventually favor the human side.

Mustering and heartening an army to attack a dragon will be difficult, but if the beast has been devastating the land, or has a huge hoard, a little impassioned rhetoric should do the job. Keeping the troops in the field after horrendous initial casualties may be harder. This is where commanders with high *Leadership* and *Bard* skills make all the difference. Still, rhetoric can only go so far; the leaders had better have a good plan.



FEAR AND FLAME



Dragons Are: Powerful to Very Powerful, Fairly Common, Intelligent, and Exotic.

Dragons Represent: Ravening terror, threatening to devastate human civilization and even wipe out humanity altogether.

PCs Are: Tough human or similar heroes, struggling to acquire the power, skill, and knowledge to challenge the dragons.

This campaign puts a post-apocalyptic spin on conventional fantasy games – and dragons provide the apocalypse. Traditionally, full-sized dragons are a threat and a rarity; this campaign assumes that the threat has been realized, and dragons have become too common.

The Campaign World

The simplest set up for this game's background involves two steps. 1. Take the map of a fantasy world. 2. Wreck it.

The basis should be a coherent, consistent fantasy setting, probably the usual pseudo-medieval elves-and-dwarves-and-wizards pattern. Feel free to use any published world, so long as you enjoy mangling it; Yrth (from the upcoming *GURPS Banestorm*) is a good candidate. Treat your choice the same way that post-apocalyptic thrillers treat the real world.



The Dragons

Now, add wyrms. The world probably had them before, but they probably were rare, up in the mountains and on the map's edges. But something has changed.

Precisely what triggered the disaster should begin as a mystery to the PCs, and could be irrelevant to them for some time. In fact, you do not have to decide at first yourself. The following are some possibilities:

1. Dragons control their own fertility, but normally choose to keep themselves rare, to avoid competition for lairs and hoards. However, a few years ago, after too many respected wyrms were slain by bands of nasty little human adventurers, the dragon council resolved to end the problem by going on the offensive. Now, after decades of breeding and preparation, the dragon "army" has been unleashed. The elders will sort out the dragon population problem once the war ends.

2. Dragon breeding is a subtle mystery for human scholars, who do not realize that young dragons start out very numerous and very small, resembling mundane lizards. Breeding always takes place in wilderness areas, where another predatory monster species heavily thins out the young before they sprout wings and fly to mountains in search of lairs. Unfortunately, humans (or orcs, or dwarves, or somebody) consider the natural predator a problem, and a few years ago, a strong king organized a campaign of extermination. This ignorant mistake's effects created a generation of young firebrakes.

3. A wizard (or possibly a powerful, magically adept dragon) recently attempted a great spell – which suffered a disastrous failure. It opened gates to one or more worlds where dragons are common, or perhaps pulled the dragons through from several other worlds. (This could well be related to the "Banestorm" of

Yrth; if the game is set on Yrth, the Dark Elves may have tried their great spell again, even more disastrously than before.)

Other options and variations are possible; for example, the elder dragons from (1) could have sought a magical solution to their problem, leading to the great summoning of (3). GMs can get as complicated as they wish.

In any case, the dragons have now appeared – and attacked. The result is hardly a "war," as the dragons have no overall strategy. In some places, solitary dragons wander at random, plundering and destroying; in others, groups (perhaps families) of dragons work together methodically. Some dragons accept surrenders, and employ humans as slaves (though never as anything better). Others seek only to destroy. In some places, human heroes or armies have scored victories, and some communities are holding out, although they have a hard task defending their fields, but the fury and power of the sudden eruption, from so many directions, wrecked any initial chances of an organized defense.

Now, human forces are beginning to coordinate, but squabbles between leaders and uncertainty over the best strategy complicate matters – and far worse, some dragons, too, seem to be cooperating to plan their next moves.

Dragon Types

GMs should pick a dragon species from Chapter 3, perhaps with a range of sizes or ages, for use as the main opposition. The standard Western Dragon (p. 56) is the obvious candidate. If the chosen back-story permits the involvement of multiple species, things can become more unpredictable for PCs. Fighting wyrms on the plains, small flying dragons in the mountains, and sea serpents on the oceans, would call for a greater range of tactics, and may increase the sense of viciously hostile world.

CHARACTERS

This straight-down-the-line dragon-slaying campaign pitches bands of heroic human (and other) adventurers against lots of big lizards. There will lots of combat, lots of glory, and almost certainly lots of dead heroes. Bloodthirsty slayers simply wanting combat will have every opportunity, but diplomacy, strategy, and planning, will all be necessary as communities struggle to organize.

1. Take the map of a fantasy world.
2. Wreck it.

Players should therefore be competent and combat-oriented. The optimum starting point level depends on the campaign style and the average dragon's power level, but 150-200 point characters may fare better than the usual 100-pointers. Overwhelmed individuals may have to be disposable – but hey, they get to try to kill dragons. A lot. Groups consisting entirely of tough or canny warriors fit the post-catastrophe theme, but leavening these with a few wizards and healers may make for better survival chances.