



HEROQUEST



Core Rules



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What You Need

To play *HeroQuest*, you need paper, pencils, and one twenty-sided die for each participant.

A set of poker chips, preferably including green and red chips, is a handy optional item to have on hand. You might also want to use miniature figures, handouts, or maps. With the wider use of electronic gaming publications and a wealth of historical information only a Wi-Fi connection away, many Narrators find a laptop an increasingly indispensable resource at the gaming table.

abilities listed on a record called a character sheet. Using these abilities, the PCs pursue various goals in an imaginary world portrayed by a participant called the Narrator. The Narrator controls various other people and creatures in this fictional environment. The players describe how their PCs pursue their goals; the Narrator challenges them by putting obstacles in their path. Sometimes these barriers to success come in the form of supporting characters who oppose them; at other times, they're impersonal physical or mental challenges, like a lock that must be picked or a cliff the characters have to climb. Whenever the characters try to overcome a difficult obstacle, the Narrator decides how difficult it will be. Using numbers attached to their abilities, the players roll dice to see if they prevail. The Narrator rolls dice to represent the resistance posed by whatever challenge they face. Their success or failure, as determined by the die rolls, changes the direction of the story, in either a big or small way.

Although some games last for only an evening, it is typical for one group to play a series of stories involving the same characters and setting over a period of time. We refer to them collectively as a series, or sometimes a campaign. (The latter term derives from the origins of the roleplaying form in historical war games.)

A transcript from a portion of a *HeroQuest* session might go as follows. (Don't expect to understand the game rules the players refer to; we'll explain them later.)

Lynne, the Narrator, is running a game she calls TWisTSHoCK, in which the characters play a disparate band of people in a dystopian near future united by their shared history as victims of mysterious implantation surgeries. Each has a weird power granted them by these bio-implants. They've been trying to find out who placed these devices inside them, and for what reason, while at the same time evading capture by the secret police. The players and their characters are:

Rich, who plays Mike McNally, an alcoholic former insurance salesman who can breathe underwater. Yumei plays Lila Frost, a music producer possessing an empathic relationship with electronic devices. Sara plays Anna Najari, a homemaker who can see images from peoples' thoughts. Ashley plays Bruce Cortland, an antiques dealer who can cause small quantities of solid matter to transmute into gas.

The session is already in progress. In the story, it's the middle of the night. The group has broken into the offices of a corporation they believe to be connected to their implantations. They've subdued a security guard, gagging him and trapping him in a chair

with duct tape. As a supporting character, the part of the guard is taken by portrayed by Lynne.

Rich: I look around the office. What do I see?

Lynne: It's a richly appointed office with heavy mahogany desk. Identical leather books, for decorative purposes only, line the oak shelves. There's a water feature recessed into the marble flooring—a real pond stocked with holographic koi, who swim to the surface and react curiously to your presence.

Yumei: Is there a painting on the wall behind the desk?

Lynne: Yes, as a matter of fact. An abstract painted in Jackson Pollock's famous drip style.

Ashley: Bruce uses his Appraisal ability to see if it's an authentic Pollock, or otherwise valuable.

Lynne: Okay, roll the die.

[Lynne has decided that the painting is an interesting detail that is tangential to the storyline. As such, its only purpose in the narrative is to give Bruce a chance to shine and demonstrate his competence. Accordingly, Lynne decides that his attempt will, barring an obviously horrible die roll on his part, automatically succeed. To preserve the players' sense of uncertainty, she rolls her own die, but does not bother to check the result.]

Ashley: Success, with a 14.

Lynne: You identify it as the work of a Pollock imitator named Hayden Trainor. At auction it would probably fetch between ten and twenty thousand dollars.

Rich: I take it down from the wall.

Sara: What are you doing?

Yumei: Don't touch anything!

Rich: We can sell it and buy guns!

Sara: Guns? I keep telling you guns will just get us in more trouble!

Ashley: Besides, do you know how hard it is to sell a stolen painting?

Rich: Well, in that case, I take it down and rip a hole in it. These scumbags are gonna pay for messing with me.

Ashley: I try to get it out of his hands—safely—before he vandalizes a work of art.

Lynne: Mike, do you let him?

Rich: No, I want to wreck it.

Lynne: Okay, what abilities are you using?

Rich: I have Everything I Touch Turns To Crap at 13.

Version History

HeroQuest began its life in 2000 under a slightly different title, *Hero Wars*. The game was first issued, in a revised edition, under its current name, in 2003. The book you hold in your hands is the game's first appearance as a core rules set intended for use in any genre. Previous editions were set in Greg Stafford's classic fantasy world of Glorantha. Moon Design offers a line of *HeroQuest* products set in Glorantha, which remain compatible with this generic version of the rules. A new Glorantha-based genre book, as well as sourcebooks to supplement play in a variety of other settings and genres, will follow this one. You don't need to know anything about Glorantha to understand this book or play *HeroQuest* games.



Ashley: I have Stop Stupid People From Doing Stupid Things at 17.

Lynne: Roll the dice.

Ashley: Success, with a 7.

Rich: [pumping his fist in the air] Whoo! I got a 1—a critical success!

Lynne: That's a minor victory for Mike. He manages to keep it away from Bruce, and then sticks it down on the desk, impaling it on an expensive pen holder.

Having removed the painting from the wall, you see that there's a safe behind it.

Yumei: I don't suppose it's open, or the combination is listed on a handy sticky note nearby?

Lynne: Afraid not.

Sara: [Putting her finger in front of her lips.] I non-threateningly approach the guard and remove the duct tape from his lips. "I don't suppose you know the combination, do you?"

Lynne: [in character, as the guard] "You think they trust me with something like that? I'm just a lowly wage slave, with a wife and a family. Six kids, I got. Please don't hurt me, please don't—"

Sara: I gently put the gag back on him.

Yumei: The safe isn't electronic, by any chance?

Lynne: [Who hadn't thought it would be, but realizes where Yumei is going with this and sees a good way to move the story forward.] Why, yes, as a matter of fact.

Yumei: Okay, I lean in and whisper softly, using my electronic empathy to coax it open...

Lynne calls for Yumei to roll her Electronic Empathy ability, and the story continues from there...

Thinking in Story Terms

Although there's no right or wrong way to play the game, a certain story-based logic does underlie the entire system. Where traditional roleplaying games simulate an imaginary reality, *HeroQuest* emulates the techniques of fictional storytelling.

Understanding this distinction will help you run the game in a natural, seamless manner. Although the game can be run in a more simulative style, you'll find that it fights you a bit when certain edge cases crop up. One of this book's objectives is to get under the hood of narrative technique and show you how it works. This will either help you run the game in its emulative style, or, if you prefer a simulative approach, to understand how you'll need to modify it to suit your preferences. For example, let's say that you're running a game inspired by fast-paced, non-fantastic, martial arts movies in a contemporary setting. A PC is running along a bridge, pacing a hovercraft, piloted by the main bad guy. The player wants his character, Joey Chun, to jump onto the hovercraft and punch the villain's lights out. You must decide how hard it is for him to do this.

In a traditional, simulative game, you'd determine how hard this is based on the physical constraints you've described. In doing so, you come up with numbers and measurements. You'd work out the distance between bridge and hovercraft. Depending on the rules set, you might take into account the relative speeds of the hero and the vehicle. You determine the difficulty of the attempt based on these factors, and then use whatever resolution mechanic the rules provide you with to see if Joey succeeds or fails. If he blows it, you'll probably consult the falling rules to see how badly he injures himself (if he lands poorly), or the drowning rules, if he ends up in the river.

In *HeroQuest*, you start not with the physical details, but with the proposed action's position in the storyline. You consider a range of narrative factors, from how entertaining it would be for him to succeed, how much failure would slow the pacing of the current sequence, and how long it has been since Joey last scored a thrilling victory. If, after this, you need further reference points, you draw inspiration more from martial arts movies than the physics of real-life jumps from bridges onto moving hovercrafts. Having decided how difficult the task ought to be dramatically, you then supply the physical details as color, to justify your choice and lend it verisimilitude—the illusion of authenticity that makes us accept fictional incidents as credible on their own terms. If you want Joey to have a high chance of success, you describe the distance between bridge and vehicle as impressive (so it feels exciting if he makes it) but not insurmountable (so it seems believable if he makes it.)

In other words, *HeroQuest* starts with story considerations, deciding the difficulty and then working backward to describe physical details in accordance with them. This is the way that authors and screenwriters make decisions. If this were a movie, the writers and director would first of all decide whether the Joey succeeds or fails. This is a structural decision; it determines if the scene continues with a thrilling shipboard combat, or concludes with a frustrated hero sputtering in the polluted waters of the Hudson River. After making this choice, they then construct the sequence to be suitably sensational, however it comes out.

Just as fundamental differences separate literature and film, roleplaying is its own narrative form with its own distinct dynamics. *HeroQuest* emulates the decision-making of older narrative forms but adapts it to the requirements of roleplaying. Chief among these is the need for uncertainty to surround all noteworthy conflicts.

Authors and screenwriters create for an audience. In roleplaying, the Narrator and players are their own audience. They must be as surprised by the outcome of events in a story as we are when we read a book or watch a movie. When Joey jumps off the bridge in a game session, everybody should be

collectively holding their breath, anxious to see if he gets to duke it out with the bad guy. The result must not be predictable. So instead of deciding if he succeeds or fails, you decide roughly how likely it is that he'll succeed, and let the die rolls make the final determination.

As Narrator, you then describe either result so that it seems compelling. Then you and the players, through the characters you control, continue to move the story forward until the next point of conflict. The contrasts between the way obstacles are created and described in fictional storytelling, *HeroQuest* Narrating, and traditional roleplaying games, are shown in the *Logic of Story* diagram below.

To sum up: Pick the resistance, then justify it.

HeroQuest's basis in fictional storytelling should not be construed as criticism of the traditional mode. The author continues to design and play in both styles, each of which has its own long list of distinct merits.

If you're trying to get *HeroQuest* to work in a more simulationist manner, you are not "playing wrong." Be prepared, though, to face a frustration or two along the way, as you bend the game in a way it may not be able to fully support.

First, Second and Third Person

Most of this book is for Narrators. However, in certain instances, particularly in sections explaining what characters can do, its use of the second person shifts to address players. We adopt this convention in the interests of minimal syntactical torture and trust that you'll be able to work it out from context.

We want both women and men to enjoy playing our game. Pronouns present an odd challenge in roleplaying game writing, because one often has to refer to a hypothetical single person doing something in the future. To clarify sentences, we will generally refer to our hypothetical Narrator as "she" and the equally hypothetical player as "he." This should not be taken as an implicit statement that only women can run games, and only men can be players.

The Logic of Story Obstacles





CHARACTER CREATION METHODS

HeroQuest offers three methods of character creation: **prose**, **list**, and **as-you-go**. Innovative Narrators may introduce other methods, like having the players answer a questionnaire, and deriving abilities from their answers.

you to rewrite the sentence. Note, however, that you cannot specify more than one sidekick in your prose description. You may face other restrictions depending on the series the Narrator is running; be sure to learn about these before starting.

The Prose Method

Write a paragraph of text like you'd see in a story outline, describing the most essential elements of your character. Include keywords, personality traits, important possessions, relationships, and anything else that suggests what he can do and why. The paragraph should be about 100 words long. If you enjoy a challenge, or have a stickler Narrator, it must be exactly that long.

Compose your description in complete, grammatical sentences. No lists of abilities; no sentence fragments. Your Narrator may choose to allow sentences like the previous one for emphasis or rhythmic effect, but not simply to squeeze in more cool things your PC can do.

Bill writes the following prose description:

Charming bounty hunter Dwayne-O Walken is known to millions of television viewers from a reality program following his world-spanning adventures. Dwayne-O's gleaming shotgun Phyllis (part of an endorsement deal) and his catch-phrase, "Ka-Chunk, punk!" strike panic into miscreants everywhere. When not building his enormous muscles or engaging in endurance training, he enjoys a glamorous tabloid lifestyle. Through his website, Dwayne-O cultivates contacts with far-flung fans from all walks of life. A dedicated gadget-lover, he panics whenever separated from his high-end cell phone and its wireless net connection. His schedule-conscious sister Darla makes his travel arrangements and fends off legions of female admirers.

Once your narrative is finished, convert the description into a set of abilities. Mark any keywords with double underlines. Mark any other word or phrase that could be an ability with a single underline. Then write these keywords and abilities on your character sheet.

There is no limit to the number of abilities you can gain from a single sentence, as long as the sentence is not just a list of abilities. If your Narrator decides a sentence is just a list, she may allow you the first two abilities, or she may tell



Dwayne-O's Abilities, Synopsised

Bill groups his abilities into rough categories, for ease of reference. Categories have no impact on the game system, so list yours in an order that makes sense to you.

Just because you group an ability in one category doesn't mean that you can't use it for other purposes. Enormous muscles might give Dwayne-O an edge in certain social situations, for example.

The categories you pick can further convey the flavor of your character. Bill has created the categories in Dwayne-O's parlance, hence the references to Doing Stuff and Knowing Stuff. For a character in an ancient historical setting, you might use lofty, fake-archaic terms for your categories. A science fiction game might require technical terms, and so on.

The Job: Bounty hunter

Doing Stuff: enormous muscles, endurance

Social: Charming, catch-phrase: "Ka-Chunk, punk!", known to millions of television viewers, legions of swooning admirers, strike panic into miscreants everywhere,

Knowing Stuff: dedicated gadget-lover, reality program, wireless net connection, world-spanning adventures,

Taking Care of Business: endorsement deal, glamorous tabloid lifestyle,

Stuff I Own: gleaming shotgun Phyllis, cell phone, website,

People: contacts with far-flung fans from all walks of life, sidekick: sister Darla (schedule-conscious, makes travel arrangements),

Flaw: panics whenever separated from his cell phone

After combing through your description, take all of the underlined phrases and convert them to list form. Your Narrator then reviews it, looking for potentially useful abilities you may have missed.

Bill checks his prose description. He's playing in a modern day series where the Narrator has decided keywords are unnecessary, so he'll be giving all abilities single underlines only:

Charming bounty hunter Dwayne-O Walken is known to millions of television viewers from a reality program following his world-spanning adventures. Dwayne-O's gleaming shotgun Phyllis (part of an endorsement deal) and his catch-phrase, "Ka-Chunk, punk!" strike panic into miscreants everywhere. When not building his enormous muscles or engaging in endurance training, he enjoys a glamorous tabloid lifestyle. Through his website, Dwayne-O cultivates contacts with far-flung fans from all walks of life. A dedicated gadget-lover, he panics whenever separated from his high-end cell phone and its wireless net connection. His schedule-conscious sister Darla makes his travel arrangements and fends off legions of swooning admirers.

Bill has double-underlined the phrase "high-end cell phone" to indicate that it is part of two abilities: the flaw Panics Whenever Separated From His High-End Cell phone, and the object itself, High-End Phone.

It took Bill's Narrator to see that Reality Program might be an ability unto itself; Dwayne-O might use it when he needs to figure out something related to television production, for example.

Advantages of the Prose Method: The prose method encourages you to think about your character in words instead of numbers. A skillful player can wring more abilities out of this method than the others; as such, it is meant to appeal to so-called power gamers. These players, who like to bend the rules to their maximum advantage, tend to be number crunchers. This method trains them to be word crunchers instead, helping them to make the leap to the HeroQuest ethos from traditional roleplaying games.

One strong idea is more powerful than a dozen unconnected ones; the 100-word limit encourages you to keep your character simple. The prose method tends to create the most vivid and offbeat abilities and ability descriptions.

Disadvantages of the Prose Method: This technique seems to reward the clever, which egalitarian-minded players may find troubling. (Actually, it's debatable whether it's better to have many abilities or just to concentrate on a few, but in questions of gaming preference, perceptions matter.) The prose method takes more preparation time, both for the players and for the Narrator, than list and as-you-go methods.

The List Method

What the list method lacks in flavor, it gains in speed and ease of use. Having chosen a character concept and name (and any other elements required by the Narrator, such as a narrative hook) complete the following steps:

1. Note your main area of expertise, which, depending on the series, may be a keyword. You probably already picked this when you came up with your character concept.

2. If your series uses other keywords, such as those for culture or religion, you may have them for free.

3. Pick 10 additional abilities, describing them however you want. (Essentially you're skipping the writing step from the prose method and going straight to a list. However, you most likely wind up with fewer abilities than the prose version.) Only one of these abilities may be a Sidekick—assuming your series allows them in the first place.

4. If you want, describe up to 3 flaws.

Steve creates a character for the same globetrotting action series in which Bill's character, Dwayne-O, appears.

His core concept is of a remorseful former counter-insurgent. Steve decides to make him a former member of the Russian military, haunted by atrocities he took part in during the Chechen conflict. After some quick research into Russian names, he calls his PC Nikolai Levshin. His narrative hook is that, if he gets wind of a chance at redemption, he'll sacrifice anything to get it.

Implicit in the concept are the two abilities **Counter-insurgency** and **Remorseful**. That leaves Steve with nine more abilities to pick. He imagines that Nikolai has been living in



Dazed

In some situations, the Narrator may rule that a character is dazed. They are conscious but unable to initiate actions of their own. If another character engages them in a contest, they can snap out of it and defend themselves.

Unconscious

Characters can be rendered unconscious by contests where achieving this state is the contest's stated goal. Unconsciousness can, depending on genre, result from chokeholds, inhalation of sleeping gas, sleep spells, rayguns set to stun, or the simple failure to remain awake while fatigued. In most adventure genres, unlike real life, it is fairly easy to knock people out without doing them permanent damage. This convention allows the heroes to remove opponents as obstacles without permanently harming them. In series employing this conceit, you can knock opponents out on a minor victory or better. On a marginal victory, they become dazed instead.

In settings where player characters routinely kill helpless opponents, Narrators should ensure that it is never easier to knock enemies out than to kill them. For more on this problem, see p. 85.

Injured

An injured character has suffered a debilitating shock to the system, one which renders him all but helpless.

To even participate in a contest, he must succeed at a prior **contest of wherewithal** to rouse himself to action. Appropriate abilities for contests of wherewithal might include:

- *Physical action*: Endurance, High Pain Threshold, Grim Determination, etc.
- *Intellectual activity*: Concentration, Iron Will, Love Of Country (if action to be attempted is patriotic), etc.
- *Social humiliation*: Savoir Faire, Unflappable, Stoic Dignity

A contest of wherewithal faces a Moderate resistance (see p. 72). Even if the injured character succeeds at the contest of wherewithal, he takes an automatic bump down whenever he uses any related ability in a contest. (The bump down does not apply to the contest of wherewithal itself.) Where it seems apt, the Narrator may choose to ignore the bump down if the character scores a major or complete victory on the contest of wherewithal.

Any active hurts or impairments continue to be counted against him as well.

In a post-apocalyptic game, Bruno the Hook (Mikko) has been injured by radiation poisoning. The Narrator, Susan, describes this as a physical injury that also impairs mental functioning. Prior to his radiation burn, Bruno suffered a Hurt in a scuffle with plaguemen. He suffers the Injured penalty and the previous -3 Hurt penalty.

The rest of Bruno's scrounger band goes off in pursuit of some gasoline canisters they see up on a ridge, leaving him to suffer on a pallet in a cave. After they're gone, a hungry mutant coyote snuffles its way into the cave mouth. Bruno wants to scare it off, using his Hurl Object ability to toss a rock at it.

First, he must succeed at a contest of wherewithal. "I use my Adrenaline Rush ability to momentarily ignore the pain and clear my mind," says Mikko. This ability is rated at 16 and reduced by the -3 penalty to 13; he rolls a 6. Using the Resistance Class table (p. 72), Susan sees that a Moderate resistance is 19. She rolls a 16. This is a success vs. success in Bruno's favor, a marginal victory. It allows Bruno to attempt to throw the stone at the coyote.

(If he had failed, he might grope for the stone, only to have it fall out of his debilitated grasp.)

Bruno has Hurl Object at 14; his -3 Hurt penalty reduces the target number to 18. The coyote has Dodge at 18. Mikko rolls a 19; Susan gets a 20. Bruno takes a bump down from his Injury, for a fumble vs. fumble—a tie. In this context, Susan rules that the rock misses the coyote, and that he and Bruno snarl ineffectually at one another until it finally gets bored and slinks off.

Physical traumas will impose these penalties on nearly all actions; severe pain makes it hard to concentrate on mental and social activities, too. Some mental injuries will likewise make it difficult to perform physically.

Certain other injuries are compartmentalized in effect: a particular subset of abilities is penalized, but others work as normal. Social injuries are a prime example: you may be unable to present your face in polite society, but that won't stop you from solving equations, firing a pistol, or painting a portrait.



Contest Options

Players who want more tactical choices can use these optional rules.

Risky Gambits

During an extended contest, a character can attempt to force a conflict to an early resolution by making a **risky gambit**. If the character trying a risky gambit is lucky enough to win the exchange, he lodges an additional 1 resolution point against his opponent. However, if the character trying the risky gambit loses the exchange, his opponent lodges an additional 2 resolution points against him.

If both contestants engage in a risky gambit, the winner lodges 2 more resolution points than usual against the loser.

Opting for a risky gambit should never be a purely mechanical request. Specify what you're doing that's so risky, and what bad consequences are likely to result if your gambit fails. If your proposed negative repercussions seem weak, your Narrator will worsen them when narrating consequences to match the actual outcome.

In a Samurai court intrigue game, the beautiful Lady Eiko is trying to convince her cruel husband, Lord Washizu, to spare her brother, Kichijiro. The resolution point score is 4 to 3 in Lord Washizu's favor. Her player, Sarah, says she's desperate enough to resort to her ultimate threat—that if her husband unjustly allows her brother to be executed, she'll never warm Washizu's bedchamber again. With the risky gambit invoked, she contests her Courtly Wiles 18 against Washizu's Pig-Headedness 17.

Example of success: Sarah rolls a 4 against the Narrator's 15. This outcome is a success vs. success in her favor, which would normally score 1 resolution point against Washizu. Instead she lodges a total of 2 points against him, taking him to 5 points, and concluding the contest in her favor.

Speaking in character as Washizu, the Narrator reddens, blusters, demands to know how Eiko could possibly make such a threat—and relents, mumbling that Kichijiro will be merely banished to Okinawa.

Example of failure: Sarah rolls a 15 against the Narrator's 4. This is a success vs. success in Washizu's favor. It scores the usual 1 resolution point against Eiko, plus an additional 2 as the cost of her reckless gambit, for a total of 3. This takes her to 7 resolution points, resolving the contest in Washizu's favor.

Not only does Washizu refuse her and send Kichijiro to his doom. The Narrator, checking the Climactic Resolution Table, sees that her relationship with Washizu is dying. She can't take any actions leveraging her status as his wife for the moment. Unless she takes immediate measure to correct the damage to her noble marriage, she'll never be able to do it again.

The Narrator describes Washizu turning white with anger and storming out of his audience chamber without a word, ordering his men to immediately commence the execution. Eiko cries out to him, but he pretends not to hear her sobs.



Supporting characters should use risky gambits sparingly, either as a response to a PC risky gambit, or when the Narrator feels that an extended contest has begun to drag.

Defensive Responses

In an extended contest, a character can make a **defensive response**, which lowers the number of resolution points lodged against the losing party to an exchange. If the character wins the exchange, he lodges 2 fewer resolution points against his opponent. If the character loses the exchange, the number of resolution points lodged against him decreases by 1. The total number of resolution points assigned by an exchange is never less than 0; there is no such thing as a negative resolution point.

Weird edge cases aside, defensive responses are useful only in group extended contests, when you find yourself waiting for rescue as you struggle to hold your own against a stronger opponent.



HERO POINTS

Hero points are a resource that players must carefully allocate. They allow you to heighten your victories and dull your defeats. They are the price you pay to improve your abilities over time. They are also used in a few unusual adjudications—resolving tied results between PCs, for example (see p. 24).

Gaining Hero Points

You get 3 hero points when you create your character.

At the end of every session, you get another 3 hero points. (Narrators may prefer to award a range of 2-4 depending on the length or intensity of the session—the number of hero points expended is a good indication of intensity.) Optionally, at the end of the session, the Narrator polls the players to suggest which of them delivered the most entertaining play. If a clear winner emerges by quick consensus, this player gets an additional hero point.

At the climactic conclusion of a multi-session story arc, the Narrator awards an additional 3 hero points per player, and may also poll the players to select an MVP for the entire storyline.

Some Narrators choose to award directed improvements (below) to all players at the end of each session based on their most interesting or amusing actions.

Improving Your Character

You may improve any ability by 1 point per session, at a cost of 1 hero point.

To raise an ability by 2 points at once costs 3 times the cost of raising it by 1 point. 3 points at once costs 6 times as much. To raise it by 4 points at once, which is the maximum per-session increase, costs 10 times what it would to raise it by 1.

You can add a new ability by spending 1 point; it begins with a rating of 13. If the ability seems out of character for your PC, your Narrator will probably require you to come up with a believable explanation before approving it. The easiest way to get an apparently out-of-character new ability approved is to do something in the game to justify it.

You get a little tired of playing the big dumb guy and decide to give him a surprising familiarity with existential philosophy. Knowing that your Narrator will probably question this choice, you decide to set this up in play. When the group searches a professor's apartment, you describe yourself as irresistibly drawn to a copy of Being and Nothingness on his bedstead, pocketing it to read on the way to the next obstacle. When you then try to buy a new Existentialism ability, you've already established this in-character, and your Narrator is in no position to object.

Conversely, events that occur in play often serve as inspiration for organic-seeming new abilities. If you befriend an interesting supporting character, you can acquire a Contact or Patron ability that ensures an ongoing relationship with him. (In some instances, your Narrator may ask that you not

establish relationships with supporting characters she has other plans for.) Likewise, you can make sure that you can permanently hold onto a new piece of equipment by buying it as a new ability. This process is called **cementing an experience**.

You play Carter Flanison, planetary explorer. As you tread the soupy surface of Epsilon-9, the Narrator describes a fuzzy hopping insect creature following you like a lonely house pet. As far as she's concerned, this is a throwaway image meant to add a little flavor to the scene. You're tickled by the idea, though, and describe yourself as picking one up and taking it back to your access pod. At the end of the session you buy the ability Pet: Hopper 13. What problems the furry little guy will help you solve remain to be seen, but you're sure you'll think of something.

If your setting includes extraordinary abilities not found in the real world, these may be, in keeping with the fictional reality of the world background, restricted in either availability or rate of improvement.

In Joanne's futuristic world of DNA manipulation and mutant powers, players may choose up to three specific extraordinary abilities from a list she supplies. Because these abilities are installed in the womb, players can't add them during play—what they start out with is what they get. Joanne also specifies that these cost 3 hero points to raise 1 ability point.

Catch-Ups

Players have a strong incentive to increase their biggest and most useful ability at the end of every session. Over time, this tends to leave their more colorful, but less versatile, abilities in the dust, languishing on the character sheet with their mournful starting values. This tendency reinforces itself; as the gap between highest and lowest abilities increases, they're even less likely to be used.

A package deal, called a **catch-up**, softens this tendency. Whenever you acquire a new mastery, up to five abilities of your choice also increase by 3 points apiece. Only abilities with values 5 or more points behind your newly adjusted rating in the raised ability qualify for a catch-up.

Improving Keywords

Some games allow you to raise keywords as if they're regular abilities. In a game using the umbrella approach to keywords (p. 10) it costs 1 hero point to raise a single ability under the umbrella, or 2 points to raise the entire keyword by a point (multiply the costs of raising abilities by 2 if you want to raise a keyword more than one point at a time). Package keywords can't be raised after character creation.

Your character in a mythic Russia game, *Iron-Hearted Vladimir*, is a Muscovite wheeler-dealer on the make. He has a rating of 20 in *Manipulate Superior* and you spend 1 hero point to increase it to 14. This allows you a catch-up, increasing five of his low-rated abilities by 3 points apiece. His lowest ratings are: *Mongol Customs* 13, *Drink Vodka Moodily* 13, *Sentimental* 13, *Mythology of St Alexander Nevsky* 14, *Look Pious* 14, *Russian Customs* 15 and *Cunning Tactics* 15.

Your current aim is to win the favor of the notoriously bibulous abbot of the local monastery, so you choose to improve *Drink Vodka Moodily*, *Mythology of St Alexander Nevsky*, *Look Pious*, *Russian Customs* and *Cunning Tactics*. *Drink Vodka Moodily* goes from 13 to 16, *Mythology of St Alexander Nevsky* and *Look Pious* to 17, *Russian Customs* and *Cunning Tactics* to 18. This leaves *Sentimental* still at 13, but there's no room for that if Vladimir is going to rise in the Muscovite court!

In a game with umbrella keywords you may only raise three abilities (because there tend to be fewer abilities on your character sheet), or one keyword and one ability. You can't raise abilities under a keyword, nor gain a catch-up when the effective value of a sub-ability reaches a mastery (because it's the keyword, not the abilities under it, that has a rating).

Directed Improvements

On occasion a Narrator may increase one of your abilities, by 1 to 3 points, or give you a new ability, usually rated at 13. These are called **directed improvements**.

Ability increases are usually rewards for overcoming particularly important or dramatic obstacles. They happen immediately, rather than at session's end. Directed increases are not counted against you when determining the cost of an ability increase for that session.

Bodo, a humble rat-catcher in the Gloranthan city of Pavis, uses his low-rated *Eloquence* ability to sway the cruel *Gimgim the Grim* from executing his friends. His player, *Tadaaki*, roleplays the scene splendidly, and tops it off by rolling a critical against the Narrator's failure. The Narrator, *Mika*, describes the normally sinister and stoic *Gimgim* as moved to tears. The moment is so memorable that she immediately increases *Bodo's Eloquence* by 3 points, from 13 to 16.

At the end of the session, *Tadaaki* wants to raise *Eloquence* by another point. The directed improvement is ignored when determining the cost of the improvement, so it takes only 1 hero point to take the ability from 16 to 17.

Narrators can use in-session improvements to encourage roleplaying from players who don't usually get into it—it can be a very concrete form of praise. Post-session rewards often boost colorful secondary abilities.

New abilities are provided as logical outgrowths of the plot, and need not reflect success at a particular contest.

Cybersoldier Jonathan "Psycho" Vallone inhales a dose of an alien drug and goes on a hallucinatory trip that grants him a sudden understanding of an arcane local philosophy, *Rhomboidalism*. To allow him to draw on this new insight, the Narrator gives him the ability *Rhomboidalism* 13.

In a game with umbrella keywords or keywords as packages, directed improvements should be to individual abilities—again the idea is to encourage colorful abilities that players might not otherwise improve or add.

Why Advance Characters At All?

Few of the adventure genres we draw inspiration from actually feature significant character improvement through the course of a series. Mysteries, pulps, military adventures, westerns, and space operas tend to feature characters who are highly competent from the outset. Occasionally a secondary character, most often a male ingénue, starts out as a greenhorn and proves himself in the course of the story. (Just as often, a once-competent secondary character redeems himself and returns to his legendary past level of competence.) Other, grimmer genres, like horror, satirical SF, and arguably post-apocalyptic survivalism, keep their protagonists relatively weak throughout.

Fantasy is a prominent exception: it is not uncommon to follow a character from humble beginnings to epic achievement.

Rate of improvement is basically, then, a genre element. Narrators who want a rapid growth curve should decrease the costs of ability improvement. Those who want slower growth should increase them.

That said, roleplayers really enjoy increasing their PC's abilities on a regular basis. Regular ability boosts helps to keep them invested in their characters, and thinking of their futures. This is one area where *HeroQuest* bows more to the demands of the roleplaying form than to precedents set by the source material.

In series fiction, relationships are another common exception; highly competent heroes often make friends or contacts they meet again in a sequel. Narrators can encourage this with directed improvements.

Extended Contests and Healing Resistances

Narrators anxious to recognize the fine gradations of extended contest results can use the following rules. In an extended contest (rising action), the resistance is 14, or four times the difference between results, whichever is greater. In an extended contest (climactic scene), the resistance is 14, or four times the total resolution points scored against the character, whichever is greater.

The mercenary *Ingrid Umlaut* was debilitated on the *Transix Orbital Platform* when the *Big Garçon* hacked into her zero gravity martial arts nanoware implants, reprogramming them into an expert system specializing in Byzantine hagiography. She lost a climactic contest with a 7-4 score. A street doctor will face a resistance of 84 to restore her implants to their proper function.

Depending on how frequently augments are used in your game, you may need to increase the base value slightly.

If you find that PCs in your series either succeed or fail with frustrating regularity, adjust the base value upwards or downwards until, through experimentation, you arrive at a number suiting your group's distribution of ability ratings. Remember, the table is just a guideline, and the context of your story will always trump it.

New Conditions, New Resistance

Resistances are usually assumed to have all complicating or mitigating factors built into them, and under most circumstances require no modifiers. Even when the PCs re-encounter a previous obstacle, you can change the resistance directly if the pass/fail cycle or other dramatic or pacing reasons indicate that this is the most entertaining choice.

Make sure that you describe changing conditions so that the change in difficulty appears believable:

- "It's very windy today, so your shot will be even trickier this time."
- "The market is on the rise today, so it's easier to get a return on your investments."
- "Those ghosts you stirred up have shown up to howl, ruining your concentration."
- "Joaquin's car is running faster today—must be that new ace mechanic he hired from Ecuador."

If you want a rematch contest against characters or creatures to have a markedly different chance of success, create conditions that mitigate for or against the opposition, altering their target numbers. Wherever possible, express these as modifiers to the PC's abilities, rather than the opposition's. Of course, it's even better if the players actively seek ways to alter the odds in their own favor, with plot and ability augments. That way, they'll have earned their triumphs, rather than merely becoming the beneficiaries of good fortune.

During the journey to the guru's subterranean lair, it made dramatic sense for the animated statues around his temple to pose a significant threat. On their way back, it would seem repetitive and annoying to give them the same attention in the narrative—but at the same time a disappointing cop-out to ignore them altogether. You therefore rule that the chakra powder given to them by the head monk disturbs their mystic senses, granting the characters +9 bonuses to their contests to evade the statues and creep away into the jungle undetected. Thus you preserve the internal reality of the setting while maintaining control of your pacing.

Credibility Tests

The process of deciding whether a proposed outcome is possible is called a **credibility test**.

In works of fiction, it is the author's job to maintain the illusion of fictional reality by presenting the reader only with events that seem credible within the rules of reality they've established for their world. Often this is an exercise in maintaining the line between the excitingly unlikely and the absurdly impossible.

If you're watching a western and the hero leaps from the top of a bluff onto the back of his speeding horse, you probably buy this as a possible action in the heightened world of the movies. If, however, you saw a movie where the hero is standing on the plain a half a mile behind his speeding horse, and then runs to catch up with it and mount it, you'd find this laughable breach of reality so great as to take you out of the movie.

As Narrator, you are never obligated to allow a contest just because two characters have abilities that can be brought into conflict. If the character's proposed result would seem absurd, you disallow the contest, period. If it seems





CREATING GENRE PACKS

This chapter shows Narrators how to adapt the game to various genres and settings.

A **genre pack** is an information kit for your players, telling them what sort of world they'll be operating in, what they can expect to be doing in it, and what extraordinary abilities (if any) they can use to accomplish these aims.

In many instances, you won't need a genre pack at all. The more familiar a genre or setting, the more you can rely on a common shorthand understanding of the world. If everybody is already big fan of fantasy author X, you can probably run a game set in his world without any preparatory work at all.

HeroQuest's descriptive approach to game mechanics means that you can easily use any reference materials designed for existing settings. All you have to do is concentrate on the words and ignore the numbers. You can use existing lines of game supplements from other companies, or non-gaming setting bibles produced for many well-known books, television shows, and movies. Mine relevant text passages for ability names, just as you would the 100-word description from a character created using the prose method.

Moon Design Publications will also produce setting packs for various popular genres, and continue its series of *HeroQuest* supplements set in the world of Glorantha.

A number of the suggestions below apply to multiple genres, but we've put them into a single category for convenience.

Keywords

Almost every genre presents a series of recurring character types. The western gives us, among others, the flinty-eyed gunfighter, the comically grizzled sidekick, the earnest schoolmarm, the feather-bedecked saloon gal, the greedy cattle rancher, the hard working homesteader and, depending on when it was written, the savage or noble Indian. Hardboiled mysteries have smart-mouthed private dicks, femme fatales, thick-skulled cops, slick mobsters, dodgy club owners, and so on.

Either through their literary resonance or mere repetition, these have become the archetypal characters of their genres.

Keywords are a tool Narrators use to encourage players to adopt the signature character types of their settings. They consist of a list of abilities standard to that type, along

with explanatory text laying out the character's activities, appearance, outlook, and goals.

For existing genres, the process of creating keywords consists of looking at the source material, identifying the types, describing them, and listing the abilities necessary to do what characters of that type do.

However, with these very familiar genres, you can often get away with not writing up keywords at all. Everybody who's seen a fair number of westerns knows the sorts of things a grizzled sidekick can do. Just give the character the ability Grizzled Sidekick and interpret it generously in play.

It's in unfamiliar worlds that keywords become absolutely necessary. Keywords were first created to present the world of Glorantha, which has its own unique set of archetypes: Humakti Weaponthane, Dragonewt Scout, Seven Mothers Missionary, and many others. Players who don't know Glorantha can't draw on a common understanding of these types to infer what they can do in play. They need textual description to orient them, and a list of abilities to suggest what actions characters of their chosen type can take.

A well-written keyword tells the player everything he needs to know to get started playing in an unfamiliar world, through the point of view of his character. You may wish to drive home this point by writing the explanatory material in the second person.

Choosing Keyword Abilities

There is no set number of abilities that ought to go into each keyword. However, you should try to keep the numbers of abilities granted by each type of keyword roughly on a par



with one another. Occupational keywords probably grant more abilities than cultural keywords.

Absolute balance between keywords is neither necessary nor probably achievable. Players with many abilities will gain only a marginal advantage in play. The range of tasks they can attempt is somewhat greater. They are also less likely to face stretch penalties. More abilities may make it easier to avoid repetitive augment attempts. On the other hand, players with fewer abilities can advance them faster. Having fewer abilities to keep track of allows many players to react more quickly. Ultimately, the core idea of the system, that every ability is mechanically identical to every other, automatically takes care of most game balance issues for you. That said, keywords with comparatively few abilities will seem less attractive to players than fully loaded ones.

Use this dynamic to ensure that the mix of characters in your group reflects the most common archetypes. If you're running a cyberpunk game, for example, you want a hacker, a mercenary with an implant, and maybe an information broker. If nobody picks any of these types, the game won't really feel like cyberpunk. It is perfectly acceptable to reward players for making in-genre choices by giving these core types longer and cooler ability lists.

Players look to keyword ability lists for inspiration when inventing their own abilities. Provide a good example by



Sample Occupational Keyword

This keyword is from a science fiction campaign set in the towering, labyrinthine city of Loom Respite. In this setting, people mutate to fit their occupations, so this keyword includes physical as well as learned abilities.

Pulper

Reviled and feared by the dwellers of the upper reaches, you are a pulper, a worker in the waste vats. Born and raised in the fetid, lightless trash chambers of the city, you have gained an aspect others find fearsome. Your dark, outsized eyes are highly adapted to low-light conditions. Your skin is pallid, your muscular frame hunched and twisted. Generations of natural selection have rendered you immune to most toxins and pollutants. Accustomed to backbreaking manual labor, you exhibit fearsome upper-body strength. The presence of hungry blood eels beneath the fetid liquid waste has taught you to quickly scuttle out of danger. Forbidden to own firearms, you've learned the martial art of klastan, which uses a trash waste shovel as its prime weapon. Though you speak Loom Respite's commlingua with a crude and halting accent, you converse fluently in chathar, the vulgar tongue of laborers and outcasts. Every Urday you take part in the mass percussive rites of your workclan, affirming your solidarity with the beleaguered toilers of the lower reaches.

Abilities: Waste Vat Worker, Reviled and Feared, Low-Light Vision, Grotesque Aspect, Muscular Frame, Upper Body Strength, Immune To Toxins, Quick Scuttling, Klastan (shovel-based martial art), Speaks Chathar, Percussionist

Flaws: Light Sensitivity, Speaks Commlingua With Crude Accent

making the ability names evocative and particular. Berserk Spearman is better than Warrior.

Cultural Keywords

Abilities for cultural keywords reflect the background knowledge the character gains simply by growing up in the culture in question. They usually include:

- a language (if their native language is not the lingua franca of the series that characters are assumed to be speaking in)
- knowledge of an area, which may range from a neighborhood to an entire region, depending on the distance people travel in that culture in the course of their ordinary lives
- (in pre-industrial societies) one or more subsistence skills, such as farming, hunting, foraging, and various crafts
- (in modern societies) basic education in reading, math, and so on. These abilities can usually be left implicit and needn't be spelled out.



Sample Cultural Keyword

This keyword is from a fantasy campaign.

Ak-Thul

You are of the Ak-Thul, the people of the white wastes. From birth, you were carried on your mother's back in a fur-lined papoose. When you first walked, you walked on snow. Soon you learned to wander for miles at a time without tiring. When you could pick up a spear, you learned to hunt. The animals you hunt are sacred to you; from their bodies you make everything you need, from the hides you wear to the bone spears you use to hunt them. At night, your people gather in their snow huts and tell the tales of the maker

gods, Big Snow and Cold Water. To build your strength, you wrestle. Your language is called Tj-thul; outsiders cannot speak it, because it hurts their tongues. Since the people from the south came, bringing with them their strange huts made from giant dead plants, you have learned to speak their tongue as well. They are nowhere as good as the Ak-Thul at smiling, riddling, or stone carving.

Abilities: Arctic Survival, Hunting, Spear, Distance Walking, Wrestling, Smiling, Riddling, Reverence For Animals, Craft Hide Clothing, Craft Bone Tools, Stone Carving, *Mythology:* Big Snow and Cold Water, *Languages:* Tj-Thul, Umerian.

Many culture keywords will also include a working knowledge of a religious faith or ideology. Pantheistic cultures may allow you to take a general keyword for the core mythology and then take one or more religious keywords to specialize in the rites and myths of particular gods of their pantheons.

In some settings characters might belong to two cultures: a base culture and a sub-culture.

Religious Keywords

Religious organizations may provide tutelage in the rites and myths of a particular god, and also serve as mutual aid societies that teach occupational and other abilities.

In most settings, religion won't play a sufficiently central role to require religious keywords.

For series set in imagined worlds, you may still want to list the faiths available to the characters, with descriptive text.

Extraordinary Powers

It's easy to apply common sense to situations when characters use abilities that exist in our real world. You know that a man can't run as fast as a horse, bend a crowbar over his knee, or access a credit card database with his mind.

In the various fantastic and futuristic genres, characters may be able to do some or all of those things. Any ability that is impossible in the real world but possible in a genre setting is called an **extraordinary power**. Most genres offer only a single means of acquiring extraordinary powers: through magic, physical mutation, the use of technology, or whatever. A few may allow multiple sources of extraordinary powers: examples include comic book heroes and genre mash-ups, like fantasy/cyberpunk.

Extraordinary powers are limited by two factors. One, like any ordinary ability, is the rating. That tells you how well the character can



GAMING IN GLORANTHA

Many established players will want to know how to adapt this edition of *HeroQuest* to games set in its original setting of Glorantha. This chapter scratches the surface, providing a very basic starting point toward that goal. It will be expanded in upcoming Glorantha-centric supplements from Moon Design.

Given its space constraints, this chapter cannot serve as a new reader's introduction to this rich and detailed world. To learn about Glorantha, start with the official www.glorantha.com website, *Glorantha: Introduction to the Hero Wars* (from Moon Design) or *Glorantha: The Second Age* (from Mongoose Publishing, available in print and PDF).

What is Magic in Glorantha?

Runes power Gloranthan magic. Different magical systems interact with the runes in different ways. Worshipers of gods

develop an affinity with certain runes, and for actions within that rune's sphere of influence; many theists mark themselves with magical tattoos to show their runic affinities. Spirit magicians work with spirits which possess the power of particular runes and own charms that hold these spirits, gained by those spirits' friendship. Wizards manipulate runes into spells powered by energy drawn from nodes in the Essence Plane.

Magical abilities allow you to overcome tests when describing actions. Different levels of magical understanding allow you to stretch credibility in increasing ways.

At low levels of understanding (common magic for theists, charms for spirit magicians, or blessings for wizards), you are only able to become exceptionally powerful at normal activities. Magic does not allow someone to do something they could not normally achieve, just do it better. If you focus on



the Movement rune, you might be able to fill your lungs with Orlanth's breath and run faster than a professional athlete. Or if you focus on the Fertility rune, you might be able to sing a song that speeds normal healing, or set bone so that it heals as good as new.

With guidance (as an initiate for theists, a practitioner among animists, or adept for wizardry) you can use the runes to achieve supernatural effects that would defy a normal credibility test. An Orlanth initiate who uses his Movement rune might run up a wall, fly, or teleport; a Chalana Arroy healer can use the Fertility rune to regrow a limb or help the lame to walk again.

Framework:

Three Forms of Magic

Origin: Glorantha is a magical world ruled not by physics and natural law, but by the mythic interaction of supernatural forces. Myth defines culture, and also palpably shapes reality. The type of magic people wield is determined by culture and religion. Glorantha's many religions interact with the Other Side. Travelers to this unearthly realm can interact with gods, saints and spirits, taking personal journeys into eternal myths. Three distinct systems give magic to mortal beings: Divine Magic, Spirit Magic, and Wizardry:

- Divine Magic users emulate divine entities to draw on the magic of the God World. *An affinity is something you are.* Having a particular type of magic affects your behavior.
- Spirit Magic users strike deals with spirits—entities resident in animals, plants, simple objects, and features of the natural world. *A spirit is something you have.* You need to satisfy your spirits in order for them to work for you.
- Wizards cast highly specific spells learned from the esoteric study of magical texts, manipulating abstract magical forces. *A spell is something you know.* The limits of your knowledge are sharply circumscribed.

Other Magic

Many Gloranthans have magic abilities that don't fall into one of the three religious approaches. You might have an unusual talent due to supernatural ancestry, or have gained it on a heroquest.

HeroQuests

Each religious approach has special rituals that allow worshippers to cross over to the Other Side and reenact a myth. This practice is called heroquesting, and it can result in gaining an unusual magic ability, or a blessing for an entire community. The details are outside the scope of this appendix, but heroquest magic doesn't need to follow the standard rules described here.

Overall Limitations: Gloranthans stick to the magics granted them by their cultural backgrounds, and so use whatever magic is locally available. Historically, attempts to distill or purify ancestral traditions of magic have always led to epic disaster. Just ask the God Learners.

Overall Requirements: Almost everyone practices magic of some kind. Ordinary people use everyday magics in pursuit of the economic activities that provide them the necessities of life. Heroes wield powers of legendary magnitude. Whether you are a humble peasant or a mighty adventurer, the cultural element of your magic binds you to a community. The community might be as large as a nation or as small as a band of piratical heroes. It lends you strength, and you fight to protect it.

All kinds of magic are equivalent: Despite the different magic types, in rules terms all kinds of magic are alike: each is an ability, so the Flying feat, Eagle Flight spirit, and Fly spell are equivalent. And whether an ability is broad or narrow, ability names suffice—you don't need to detail specific effects.

Keywords represent magic: All the magic systems make use of umbrella keywords (see p. 10). You don't need to write down every specific ability.

A World of Exceptions

The world of Glorantha is vast and complex. For every generally true statement about its cultures and magical practices, there is some group somewhere to serve as an exception that tests the rule. Rather than fill this chapter with prose-killing qualifiers, we instead make broad statements that are almost always true—except for the inevitable exceptions hiding somewhere in the corners of the world. There's always someone somewhere who does it differently.

Runes

Runes are symbols that have power inherent in them. They're the magical building blocks of Glorantha. They are symbols, archetypes, embodiments, and actual matter or energy of the mundane world.

Runes are more than just written symbology. When a rune is written or inscribed, the real power of the magical image is present within it. Repetition of a rune does not weaken it, but strengthens its presence and firm reality in creation.

Myths

From a young age, you learned the myths of your culture—the often thrilling, sometimes puzzling stories recounting the exploits of the gods. These are set in the God Time, a prehistoric era before the boundaries between Mortal World and Other Side were as fixed as they are now, when gods had free reign to do new things, and to change and grow. Sixteen hundred years ago, the God Time ended, and the actions of the gods were constrained by an event called the Great Compromise. Now it is mortal men and women who change the world, using sparks

