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DRAGONRIDING

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13TH AGE IS A FANTASY ROLEPLAYING GAME BY ROB HEINSOO, JONATHAN TWEET, LEE MOYER, & AARON McCONNELL

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DRAGON RIDING

The goal of our dragon riding rules is to create a fun alternate experience that can fit into champion-tier and epic-tier 13th Age campaigns in which player characters fly into battle on dragon back. Mechanically speaking, we're not treating the right to become a dragon rider as a standard option that characters can choose like a class talent or a spell. The decision to bring dragon riding into a campaign is a story one, and it's ultimately in the hands of the GM, who will need to adjust campaign events and battles to account for dragon riding exploits.

These dragon riding mechanics won't make the game faster. On the contrary. We want dragon riding to be fun and powerful, but that doesn't make it fast. The more PCs fighting on dragon back, the slower the table. Campaigns that end up putting *everyone* on dragon back *all* the time are going to have a very different pace than campaigns that use dragon riding as a powerful spice.

DRAGON RIDING STORIES

Our descriptions of the Dragon Empire have been deliberately vague about whether dragon riding is a normal part of current power politics or a military secret lost during a previous age. That's because you get to determine the current and historical realities of dragon riding in your campaign via the usual mix of gamemaster plan, player character backgrounds, one unique things, and campaign drama.

Some campaigns might be able to accept dragon riding as a frequent event. Many other campaigns would be better off with occasional or unique dragon riding adventures or battles.

As a story event that isn't necessarily going to be repeated, and that has more to do with dramatic arcs than with the randomness of icon dice results, we're not suggesting specific requirements for dragon riders, except for the following guidelines: If you're going to ride a metallic dragon, you probably need at least one positive or conflicted relationship point with a heroic icon. If you're going to ride a chromatic/evil dragon, you probably need at least one positive or conflicted relationship point with a villainous icon. Have ambiguous icons all the way? Seems like you might be able to talk your way onto many dragon backs.

Our dragon riding mechanics are focused on what happens when you ride a dragon in combat rather than on possible out-of-combat implications of being a dragon rider. Such implications seem like story elements for your campaign. As a starting point, here are a few dragon rider stories that amuse us, starting with the somewhat vanilla idea about Imperial history that's supported most often in what we've published so far. Note that as we're presenting dragon riding, it's an activity for champion tier and beyond. Heroes destined to ride dragons might spend their time in the adventurer tier training to become more worthy.

Ancient Champions: Many armies joined forces to beat the original Wizard King, and dragon riders were one of them. The Empire was founded thanks to the aid of metallic dragons, and at least some of them tolerate riders. That's still true, but the secrets of dragon riding, or perhaps just the strengths of the relationship, aren't as strong now as they used to be. Modern heroes who become strong dragon riders might help preserve the Empire in the dark years ahead.

Drakkenhall Rising: As the Empire's ability to field dragon riders decreases, the Blue dragon has turned Drakkenhall into a laboratory exploring the conditions for getting dragons to tolerate and welcome riders. In the Blue's case, the mounts are evil dragons, so this could work out badly for parts of the Empire that aren't looking to be dominated by the Three.

Sea Wall Heroes: Dragon riding adventures require space. Big targets are also nice. The giant monsters that surge out of the Iron Sea against the Sea Wall? They're perfect targets, in wide open spaces, making for happy hunting grounds for dragon riders. The Empire needs so much help against attacks from the Iron Sea that it would probably be willing to help competent dragon riders that have icon connections with which it wouldn't ordinarily want to work.

Lives of the Axis Dragon Patrol: Consider a campaign that alternates between normal adventures and adventures on dragon back. The dragon riders might be the rockstars of Axis and get loaned out to other cities as needed. Soap-opera entanglements of patrol champions devoted to their bonded dragons play out anime style or Sergeant Rock-on-dragon-back style, depending on your tastes. Battles on dragon back could still be the exception rather than the rule—it's what the PCs are known best for, not how they spend most of their time.

War with the Giants: If your campaign ratchets up the conflicts with the giants, final battles on dragon back seem perfect for the great expanses of the Giantwalks as part of an assault on Cloudborne or the Magma Keeps.

Another Priestess Reclamation: Converting evil dragons into mounts for paladins of the light? That's so Priestess. In this campaign, places of pride on the spires of the Cathedral could be ceded to true-convert chromatic dragons ... provided the PCs can succeed with the evangelical mission!

Wings over the Abyss: We can imagine a world in which the best way of aiding the Great Gold Wyrm's battle in the Abyss is to wing down there mounted on a dragon, fight, and fly out to do it again some other day. It seems ... just possible ... that there might be powerful silver and gold dragons devoted to that cause, who accept worthy riders every few decades. You'll have to figure out whether the riders are also likely to make it back alive.

Orcs on Reds: Y'know that "terrible danger" we like to talk about, the one where the Orc Lord finds a true ally? In the Emperor's nightmares, he faces orcs empowered by the Orc Lord riding red dragons devoted to the Three. But what if the PCs could infiltrate and subvert the reds?



DRAGON RIDING MECHANICS

Before getting into the actual mechanics, let's go over a few of our assumptions. Some of these assumptions come from our desire to avoid overly fiddly rules. Dragon riding is already pushing us close to very fiddly paragraphs, so some of the assumptions below help us skip past exceptions we'd rather not have to write detailed rules about. If you want to use the dragon rules for situations that go counter to these assumptions (underworld battles riding enslaved dragons, for example), you'll have to make adjustments.

Champion tier: We see dragon riding as a champion-tier activity. Our rules aren't going to stop you if your campaign disagrees and wants dragon riding showing up in adventurer tier, but we wrote these rules assuming player characters of level 5+.

Dragon mounts roughly your level: Riding lower-level dragons may work out for you. The mechanics suggest that riding dragons more than 2 levels above you will be very hard.

Fight outdoors: Dragon riding is for fighting outdoors where you can fly. It's not for dungeoneering. Flying into the overworld? Yes. Crawling into the underworld? No, not usually. With the obvious exception that you're now going to be inspired to figure out at least three cool ways that you could run amazing dragon rider fights underground.

Big battles: As you'll see in the "Building Battles Advice" section below, fighting on dragon back isn't a free lunch. Dragon riding isn't usually the solution for the typical battles that adventurers face. One of the reasons the Dragon Empire may not

have as many dragons to ride as it used to is that dragons get bored without serious opposition!

Your mount has to be bigger than you are: Mounts need to be bigger than the creatures that are riding them. Humans, halflings, elves, and dwarves can ride a large or huge dragon into battle, but generally not a medium dragon. If you feel like asking questions about how many halflings can fit on the back of a dragon, be our guest, but, so far as active riding is concerned, we'll go with one. These aren't the rules for dragon-howdahs.

Willingness matters: These also aren't rules for forcing dragons to carry you against their will. We have combat rules for that type of interaction! And the endpoint usually isn't someone getting a ride to where they'd like to go

The simplest adjustments: If you feel like dragon mounts are getting misused or placed in environments in which they can't function properly, use one or more of the following options: a) take the escalation die away from the dragon mount; b) drop the dragon's defenses by 2 to 4; c) increase the difficulty of dragon riding checks by 2 to 4.

Use the flight rules as presented on page 11 of 13 True Ways: For your convenience, they're reprinted here.

We're keeping basic *flight* rules simple. For now, play it exactly like other movement, but if there's space above them, you can fly over enemies you're not engaged with without allowing them to take opportunity attacks against you. You can

be intercepted as you move, but only by other unengaged flyers that are already airborne.

We're also keeping engagement and disengagement rules the same when flyers make melee attacks against enemies on the ground. When a flyer makes a melee attack against a flying enemy, however, instead of engaging that creature, the flyer can choose to swoop past as part of the attack, but it takes a -2 attack penalty.

If your flight ends before you land or are grabbing onto something, you'll fall and probably take damage (see page 186 of the core rulebook).

THE HALFLING CAVALIER

If you're seriously enamored with the idea that a medium-sized dragon could carry a halfling or gnome rider ... well ... go ahead. It's not how we are playing it, but, if it makes you happy, huzzah.

RIDERS WITH SKILLZ

However you use dragon riding in a campaign, it should feel like a big deal, like something that not many people in the world have access to. If you're using dragon riding as a once-or-thrice-in-a-campaign thing, you'll probably want to ignore the idea that there might be feats involved with dragon riding and just let the player characters have fun. Giving PCs who deserve it the dragon riding champion feat for free is perfectly okay if fighting on dragon back is a once-in-a-campaign thing.

If dragon riding is a frequent element of the campaign, use the two feats below to reward players who invest some effort. As you'll see, PC backgrounds also matter a great deal.

It's no accident that the dragon riding feats start at champion tier. Adventurer-tier characters aren't quite up to riding dragons, and the dragons know it ... at least that's what we're assuming as the default. If you'd like to get dragon riding started early in your campaign, your campaign takes precedence—feel free to bump the feat down to adventurer tier.

DRAGON RIDING FEATS

Champion Feat: You gain a +3 bonus to your dragon riding skill checks. In addition, when your dragon attacks and scores a critical hit, you keep mastery automatically.

Epic Feat: Movement and location-based effects that would ordinarily only affect you, like a *teleport* spell (or power) or the rogue's *shadow walk*, may also be able to affect your dragon mount, depending on whether you and the GM can agree on the sanity of the effect. The effect counts as a free-action use of mastery, so you'll have to roll a skill check to maintain mastery after executing the stunt (see below).

DRAGON STATS

There's no need for new stats, because we've got plenty of dragons. Use the previously published dragon stats from the core *13th Age* rulebook (pages 217–23) and *13 True Ways* (pages 182–88). Since the dragon stats were originally designed as monster

stats rather than as elements of an adventuring party, you'll find some adjustments and interpretations in what follows.

Hit points: You and your mount have separate hit points and are affected separately by conditions.

Initiative: If you start a battle mounted, you and your mount take your turns at the same time, interspersing actions as you like between the two of you (see below). Determine your initiative bonus by averaging your initiative bonus and your mount's initiative bonus.

If you use a move action to mount up during the battle, during your next turn you and your mount both act on the initiative count of whoever had the lower initiative.

Adjustments: There are some special rules about how to handle dragon abilities that appear in the "Using Mastery" and "Building Battles Advice" sections below. To summarize, dragon mounts don't have free access to all their attacks and abilities; some require the rider to have mastery at that moment. In addition, dragon random abilities aren't in play except in special circumstances, and we're recommending you ignore the *metallic awe* ability given to metallic dragons in *13 True Ways*.

Movement & Engagement

Your mount does most of the moving for you and determines whom you're engaged with. You're considered to be engaged with anyone your mount is engaged with. Your personal bonuses to disengage checks don't do you much good when you're mounted because it's your mount that is doing the actual moving.

Movement and Miniatures

If you're using miniatures to handle combat, you'll be tracking your dragon's position while you're mounted. Determine distance and engagement by the position of your dragon mount—the possible placement of your PC mini, draped somewhere over the dragon's back, is not relevant. Movement is determined by the dragon, which is probably a bit faster than you as a humanoid PC, if you worry about such details. Plus, of course, dragons fly, and the presence of a rider doesn't slow them down much unless you're too big to be carried comfortably (see "Dragon Riding Mechanics" above).

Opportunity Attacks

Given the dragon's claws and fangs, you're always considered to be dangerous enough to make opportunity attacks, even if you are a frilly mage armed only with a wand. When you and your dragon get to make an opportunity attack, you can use either your own normal opportunity attack or the dragon's melee attack. Making a mounted opportunity attack doesn't cost you mastery, either.

Healing Your Mount

If you decide to use precious healing resources to heal your mount, treat it as if it has a single recovery that can heal 25% or so of its hit points. Obviously it should also heal a bit between battles, but don't let it heal up completely—make PCs feel special for being able to recover well.

Action Economy

Technically, both you and your mount get your full complement of actions: standard, move, and quick. But only technically, since you're both going to spend an action to keep the rider/mount dynamic operating.

You the rider: You burn your move action to ride your mount. Therefore, the actions you get to use normally are your standard action and your quick action.

Note that you could always choose to substitute downward and use your standard action as a move action, but that normally doesn't do you much good when you're riding. It's your mount that is doing the actual moving, so pretty much the only thing that your move action is likely to be good for is dismounting, which lets you move a little ways away from your dragon as you dismount, but note that you used your standard action to accomplish that and your move action got burned by starting your turn mounted, so it's unlikely you'll do much more the turn you dismount.

Your dragon mount: Your dragon burns a quick action just dealing with having you as a rider, so your dragon gets to use a standard action and a move action. As you'll see below, moving around is no problem, but getting your mount to attack with any of its actions requires mastery.

RIDER CONTROL: THE MASTERY MECHANIC

When you roll initiative while mounted (or when you use a move action to vault atop your dragon), you gain mastery of your mount. So long as you have mastery, you and your mount are likely to fight better and be capable of a couple special actions you can't ordinarily use. Each time you or your mount perform an action that requires mastery, you have to make a dragon riding skill check to maintain mastery.

In other words, the good news is that you always get to perform the action that requires mastery. You're not rolling to see whether you get to do the cool thing. Instead, you roll as you're performing the action to keep your mastery so you can do other cool things later.

The dragon riding skill check for maintaining mastery depends on the dragon's tier, the relative level of you and your dragon mount, and the size of the dragon.

First, the base skill check is determined by the dragon's tier:

Dragon level 1–4: DC 20

Dragon level 5–7: DC 25

Dragon level 8–10: DC 30

Second, add +1 to the DC for each level that your dragon is higher than you. In addition, if the dragon is three or more levels higher than you, add *another* +2 to the DC.

Third, if the dragon is huge, add +1 to the DC.

You make a standard skill check against that DC to maintain mastery: $1d20 + \text{your level} + \text{your dragon riding ability score modifier} + \text{your points in a relevant background}$. The ability modifier you use varies depending on the type of dragon you're riding.



Dragon Riding Ability Scores: Dragons are finicky about whom they respect as a rider. Different dragons respond better to different styles of command. The list below indicates which two or three ability scores you can choose from to make your dragon riding skill check for each color of dragon. Use the highest ability modifier of those allowed. As you can see, metallic dragons are usually easier to control than most of the chromatic dragons. The exceptions are the white dragons, who'll let most anyone boss them around.

Dragon Riding Ability Modifiers

White: Your highest ability score.

Black: Dexterity, Charisma.

Green: Dexterity, Intelligence.

Blue: Strength, Charisma.

Red: Strength, Constitution.

Brass: Constitution, Dexterity, Charisma.

Bronze: Strength, Constitution, Wisdom.

Copper: Dexterity, Intelligence, Charisma.

Silver: Strength, Intelligence, Wisdom.

Gold: Strength, Wisdom, Charisma.

BLIZZARDS, VOLCANOES, AND SHADOWS

The 13th Age Bestiary includes monster stats for variant white, black, and red dragons, not to mention the oddball that is the shadow dragon. Use the ability scores suggested for the variant dragons or adjust them slightly if you want to account for a special dragon's story.

The shadow dragon, however, is something both new and surly. It's hard to believe that the shadow dragon would have much to do with would-be riders, so let's play it like this: if you can convince a shadow dragon to accept you as a rider, use your third highest ability score as your dragon riding ability.

Given that the shadow dragon's gifts are pretty much always cursed, I'd almost certainly play that riding a shadow dragon is the first step in a career as a shadow thief mook (*13th Age Bestiary*, page 193). Cal Moore, our editor, takes it one step further: "I think I'd require a successful mastery check every time the escalation die is even, or you fall through the dragon to a splattery death."

MASTERY CHECK MODIFIERS

Sometimes things happen that make your next dragon riding skill check more difficult. Note that these effects don't outright strip you of your mastery, they just make it harder for you to keep mastery the *next* time you use it. Whether or not your next dragon riding skill check succeeds, the modifiers only apply to that check.

You or your mount become staggered OR drop to 0 hit points: +2 to the DC for each instance. That's cumulative, so if you both become staggered, that's +4. If you heal up and then become staggered again, the DC bump would be +6, but that would indicate that you're not finding any reason to use your mastery while you're taking all that damage.

Getting hit by an attack against Mental Defense: +2 to the DC for each hit, cumulative (either you or the dragon).

USING MASTERY

While you have mastery over your mount, here are the ways you can use it. All these options require that you and your mount are conscious and able to take the actions involved.

Mounted attack: The first time your dragon attacks each turn (except for opportunity attacks), you must roll a dragon riding check to maintain mastery. You don't have to make multiple checks if your dragon attacks multiple times in the same turn or if it manages to trigger a special attack with one of its natural attack rolls.

Mounted defense: If you or your mount are the target of an attack that is not also targeting the other member of the partnership, you can spend a free action once per round to switch the target from rider to mount or from mount to rider.

There are corner cases such as monster attacks that can only target staggered enemies that end up targeting the non-staggered member of the partnership. Don't worry about the

corner cases; the monsters already have a tough enough time against a PC dragon rider.

As just one example of the possibilities, consider the rider of a blue dragon who uses mounted defense to switch the target of a spell from himself to his dragon ... and then uses the blue's *counter-spell* ability to ignore the spell!

Mounted special ability: Passive abilities like *escalator* and *resist fire 12+* and the bronze dragon's *ragged defenses* don't require a mastery check. But when you use a dragon's special ability that costs the dragon an action, even if it's a free action like the copper dragon's *swift mind* and silver dragon's *evasive turn*, that action requires mastery and requires you to make a dragon riding check to retain mastery.

NO MASTERY?

You don't take a penalty for not having mastery of your mount at the moment. You just can't use mounted attack, mounted defense, or mounted special ability. Normally that means your mount will use its standard action to make an additional move.

REGAINING MASTERY

There are two ways to regain mastery as a rider. One is easy but costly. The other is dicier.

Standard mastery: Spend a standard action to regain mastery. No dragon riding skill check necessary.

Quick mastery: Spend a quick action (once per round) and roll a hard save (16+). If you succeed, you regain mastery. If you fail, you lose the action and don't gain mastery.

HORSES, LIZARDS, AND MORE

The basics of these rules should also end up working for riding lizards, warhorses, and dinosaurs. We'll cover that territory later.

One thing that's worth mentioning is that the lesser mounts will probably end up with some mastery-related abilities that allow the mount to fight and operate better than when it doesn't have a rider. In this one respect, dragons get the short end of the stick—they already have so many powers and so much raw power and ego that they don't usually gain new abilities by having a rider!

BUILDING BATTLES ADVICE

Building battles that involve dragon riding isn't going to be an exact science. Many puissant champion-tier and epic-tier adventuring parties already make a mockery of our standard building battles guidelines. That's particularly true with a) groups including players with an eye for maximizing gain while minimizing risk; and b) large groups, because the truth is that the synergistic advantages of having multiple player character power sets to interact with aren't really accounted for by our arithmetically linear building battles tables.

The Building Battles table on page 203 of the core rulebook (and elsewhere!) is conservatively designed to make sure that beginning and less-synergistic groups don't get wiped out early. If your group doesn't qualify as a beginning group, our standard GM advice recommends that you should make battles unfair because that's how they'll actually turn out challenging and fun.

So what do you want out of your dragon riding battle? If a dragon riding fight is a unique or very rare moment in the campaign, maybe you should treat each dragon mount as if it was another PC of its level. If it's lower level than the PCs, it will add less opposition than a normal PC. If it's a higher level dragon, it will add a bit more than a regular PC. The PCs are probably getting the better of the balance.

If dragon riding battles are common instead of rare, you're also going to want to make adjustments for dragon size and special abilities.

Size: Huge dragons have a bucket more hit points, and the mounted defense option for using mastery makes the mount's hit points a credible resource.

Dragon abilities: Not all colors of dragons are equal. The blue and the red offer more than other chromatics. But let's not get distracted from where the real power resides—we wrote the metallic dragons as giant blazing warning signs that scream *you probably don't want to mess with these essentially good dragons!* If the metallic dragons are your mount, breathing paralyzing smoke (silver) and acrid smoke that hampers (copper), you are going to be a LOT tougher than normal, and probably a lot tougher than PCs mounted on chromatic dragons. GMs, don't forget the rules for how often metallic dragon breath weapons trigger that appear on page 183 of *13 True Ways*.

In addition, we suggest that you ignore the *metallic awe* ability of metallic dragons, partly because it's too good in the PCs' arsenal, partly because we should let the chromatic dragons have something they can do better than the metallics, and partly because metallic dragons that accept riders are still awesome but not uniquely awesome.

Even with these adjustments, the metallic dragons are tougher than the chromatics. If we were striving for game balance, we'd make them harder to control than the chromatic dragons, but that doesn't match the story of the Dragon Empire. If your campaign world veers from traditional chromatic/metallic conceits, feel free to raise the DCs for metallic dragon riding checks a couple points, but that's not appropriate for our world. Given the number of multi-target attacks the metallics possess, GMs may be able to fulfill their dreams of using all their nasty monster miniatures.

Random dragon abilities: Page 217 of the *13th Age* core rulebook and page 183 of *13 True Ways* list random abilities meant to be rolled (or selected) for particularly interesting dragons in your campaign. Some abilities don't do much, others are extremely powerful. That's no big deal when the ability belongs to a monster the PCs must deal with, but a dragon mount with a powerful ability such as *raw power*, *damage aura*, or *more breath* is a great deal more powerful.

Here's how we are handling this: random dragon abilities aren't normally available when a dragon is serving as a mount. The dragon gives up a piece of its sovereignty by accepting a rider. Hence, the most powerful dragons in the world aren't likely to become mounts; they're too proud and they have abilities that set them apart already. There are two ways around this, both requiring a sacrifice on the part of the rider. First, the mechanical route—spend a feat of the dragon's tier and it can access its random dragon abilities with you as a rider. Second, the story path—make a greater connection between rider and mount the point of a quest or entire adventure, and risk the bond if the quest fails.

Rider skillz: Characters who have invested their backgrounds and one unique thing in the cause of eventually becoming skilled dragon riders will be a lot better at fighting on dragon back than a wizard who is all about tomes and Horizon politics. From one perspective, the dedicated dragon riders should be rewarded for having invested early in a career that was not necessarily going to take flight. From a dramatic perspective, they'll still want to face true challenges, and it will take more to challenge the most skilled dragon riders on splendid mounts.

Dial it up: Unlike the core system, we haven't done enough playtesting of the dragon riding rules to give you precise answers about how much opposition dragon mounts require to be a fair battle. Start with the PC-equivalent suggested above, then increment up until the PCs start to feel worried. If the entire party is riding powerful metallic dragons, well, it's time to bring in high-level opposition you might ordinarily shy away from. As Jonathan Tweet likes to say, "The PCs can always flee." And in fact, that's probably even easier on dragon back!