TO SELECT A MYTHOS

by Bob Bledsaw

Every really good campaign in which I have had the pleasure to play or judge in has had one very common trait . . . a well developed mythos. Like many groups, my campaign began by utilizing the Lord Of The Rings as the source of political structure, history, and mythos. This was great for those which had read the books, but limited the new players which were unfamiliar with them. Although this isn't a fatal handicap, it sometimes places disappointing blocks in the path of an otherwise exemplary player-character. As the game developed further, the desire of many players was to adapt non-Tolkien classes into the campaign and distort the mythos beyond rationalization. This caused me to introduce intra-dimensional nexus points into the game. While some purists may flinch at this point, let me state that only the most persistent search ever led to one of the "gates" and even then access was limited at these well-defended points.

At first I viewed this growth as the opportunity to introduce such mythos I found fascinating as a teen: John Carter & Barsoom, Conan, The Arabian Nights, and others. The real fun began when I started to develop completely new mythos for the group (more likely termed a squadron of earth-shakers by this time). I drew heavily upon Greek, Celtic, and Eastern mythologies, molded them to fit my concept of the living legends which might have formed the prehistoric truths behind them, and limited, combined, extrapolated, and restructured their special powers to obtain a unique mythos. In every instance, I sought to introduce a variety of religion and therefore often retained some pure mythologies in the new land. Around this skeleton was shaped the rest of the land beyond the nexus point; political structures, histories, economic system, geography, flora and fauna, monsters, and non-played characters which made this particular world tick were created from my steady diet of fantasy and science fiction over the years. The extra work was well worth the many hours of fun observing the earth-shakers of Middle Earth being out classed by new player-characters which could respond to the challenge of mystery more quickly. While the older players had more sheer power at their disposal, situations often came up where a little knowledge was more dangerous than none and preconditioned responses were a liability.

My personal preference leans toward the designing of a mythos without "reality" restraints. Every judge should select his own mythos with a careful eye toward what his players expect from the campaign. Chivalry & Sorcery, like Beowulf, resonates with a melody which would be ruined by an over-abundance of incongruent monsters from an entirely different mythos. Like any well done fantasy novel, a campaign can lead your players into a uniquely exciting world unlike anything they have ever experienced. I like a clean slate to begin extrapolating upon. Climate, economics, demography, naming, and so forth are then my domain. The players are given the necessary background information to function within the game and the balance becomes a world of discovery.

Like thousands of other fantasy role-playing judges, I have developed many useful tables which assist me in designing these lands based upon different mythos. It is not the towering megalith of work that it at first appears, nor do I wish to imply that you must be able to write a novel to construct one. There are as many ways to begin designing a campaign as there are judges and styles of play dictate the extent or depth of development required to maintain your player's interest and willing suspension of disbelief. Most important is the decision to begin . . . and you begin by selecting a mythos. If you prefer more concrete ground, then you could begin with Empire of the Petal Throne, Metamorphosis Alpha, or the ever popular Lord of the Rings. Gods, Demi-gods, & Heroes and the material published therein is a source of mythos.

A long trip to your local library may be necessary to flesh out the world and supply the flavor of names, mores, and sociological aspects of everyday life for your adventurers. However, I would hesitate to do it for a group of players inclined to name their characters Injun Joe the Tail-gunner, Bimbo the Bomber, and the like. They wish to play the game on a more basic level and will probably have the same great time if you spend ten minutes in preparation or ten hours. Most players enjoy a well structured campaign which gives them the "feel" of the mythos and permits the orderly progression of a player-character. Imagination stretch a little.

"Realism" in fantasy role gaming has become the scare word to be touted by some "authorities" in the hobby. They have indicated that monsters, demi-gods, and gods created for game systems by extrapolating upon "real" legends is the result of "sloppy" thinking and has no place in well run campaigns unless the constructs are true to mythology. But this depends entirely upon the end goal of the game system and how much territory the rules are intended to cover. Some game systems are purposely written to cover certain time periods and convey a "feel" of that era or period . . . such as Chivalry & Sorcery or (on a much reduced scale) En Garde. Other game systems are intentionally written to cover the constructed mythos of an entirely new fantasy world such as Empire of the Petal Throne, Runequest, Metamorphosis Alpha, or Traveller. These systems are based upon extrapolations of "real" facts, legends, mythologies of all cultural types, combinations of extuut ideas reformated into an almost unrecognizable form, and the occasional rare spark of genuine creativity (take it from a designer. . . it's really rare).

What I am trying to say is that you cannot expect to seriously use a game system such as Boothill to play a campaign based on the Conan series, but you could use a game system such as Dungeons & Dragons to play a campaign based upon a Mayan mythos or almost any non-gunpowder mythos. Because the game system is designed to cover many mythos, it will not necessarily give the correct "feel" in all cases and should be modified to suit the campaign by a knowledgeable and experienced campaign judge. Great caution should be exercised when this is done however, or imbalanced play or an aborted campaign can result. Obviously the game system is based on western mythology with a European accent more medieval than not. This should not be viewed as a limit if a campaign based upon a warmer climate, different political system, or mythos is desired.

Last and very quick, since the "authorities" are probably piling wargleweed around my soapbox and lighting torches, a couple of shots at some criticisms leveled at my campaign materials and guidelines. There is nothing "sacriligious" about introducing gods into a campaign (even if the players might defeat them). I personally would never use voodoo, Jesus Christ, Budhha, Mohammed, or the one and only Devil in my campaign. The gods in my campaign are actually the source of legends, mythologies, and religions which may be far from the true nucleus of fact that began these worshipful exaggerations, distortions, and ill-perceived powers or acts. A halfling possessing some powerful artifact might be worshiped by a large following. The being might not be of the same plane of existence, or merely a time traveller ala *A Conneticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court.*

And the final blast . . . the guideline tables we publish at Judges Guild are not intended to be used religiously, most the time, or even part of the time as the judge runs his campaign. They are very useful for designing, extrapolating, and sparking up a campaign based on Dungeons & Dragons. They represent the best efforts of many intensely involved and active college students and graduates as we literally picked apart, defined, interpreted, researched, expanded upon, and played to dawn (or death) the original Dungeons & Dragons since it was first published. The tables are not to add "realism" to any campaign. They are for the enjoyment and sources of inspiration of active campaign judges. Dat's all folks!