

PULP CLICHES FOR RISUS

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From the 1920s to the 1950s, “pulp” were the action-packed staple of millions of readers every month. The term “pulp”, derived from the cheap paper that these magazines were usually printed on, actually covered everything from detective stories to horror, from crusading avengers of justice to westerns and “spicy” romance stories. The one common factor of the genre was plenty of action, though ruthless criminals, strange locales, and forgotten civilizations cunning deathtraps, and cliffhanger endings were common components as well.

This is my attempt to capture the excitement of Pulp for **Risus: the Anything RPG**, © S. John Ross 1993-2001 (<http://www.io.com/~sjohn/risus/>)

Feedback is always welcome! Please send it to me at <mailto:ghoyle1@airmail.net>

General Cliches

An exciting occupation or interesting background was a must for a pulp hero. Many times such a person would be drawn into an ongoing mystery or adventure, and only their unique skills make the difference between success and failure. It would not be unusual to find a stage magician who solves crimes in his spare time, or a daredevil archaeologist. These backgrounds can also be found in other pulp genres (a nosy reporter could try and find the true identity of a masked crusader, for example, or stow away on an experimental rocketship); the lines between genres are often blurred.

- Stage Magician
sleight of hand, misdirection, the hand is quicker than the eye, sawing people in half without hurting them, make dramatic gestures, wear tuxedo and top hat, pull rabbit out of hat
- Gold-digging Femme Fatale
trade money for love, seduce the rich and elderly, disguise true nature, fall in love for real with hero.
- Jaded millionaire playboy/girl
throws around lots of cash, seen it all, drink gallons of champagne, expect to be waited on
- Circus Performer
walk tightrope, get shot out of cannon, swing from trapeze
- Shell-shocked Veteran
Terrified by loud noises, use rifles and bayonettes, reminisce about the Great War, nightmares
- Great White Hunter
shoot wild animals, interpret native drums, speak native languages, survive in the wild
- Movie Star
look glamorous, idolized by millions, sign autograph, memorize lines/blocking, party into the wee small hours, seduce
- Stunt Man
survive a great fall, throw fake punch, escape from crashing vehicle, slide along a bar, look kinda like a movie star
- Nosy Reporter
sniff out a scoop, drink like fish, smoke like chimney, bang out a story, protect sources, transcribe conversation
- Wonder dog
go get help, communicate by barking, protect master, sniff danger, track by smell
- Aviator/Aviatrix
fly plane, tinker with engine, storm barns, make an emergency landing

- Football player
tackle, kick, throw, catch, block
- Concert Pianist
Virtuoso Performance, nimble fingers, impeccable evening wear
- Athlete
run, swim, jump, throw, wrestle, be a good sport
- Daredevil
Escape from crashing vehicle, drive or fly any vehicle, survive a great fall, leap across crevice, hang onto fedora
- Human Fly
Climb skyscraper without gear, walk across tightrope, tip off photographers
- Policeman
Arrest criminals, interrogate criminals, drink gallons of bad coffee, smoke like a chimney, find donut shop
- Linguist
Know obscure languages, translate ancient inscriptions, pronounce the unpronounceable
- Hobo
hop freight train, sing mournful songs, pahhandle, do odd jobs, hobo code, drink anything alcoholic
- Physician
Diagnose illness, make house call, treat disease, stitch up wound, prescribe remedy
- Psychiatrist
Ask pointless or infuriating questions, analyze neurosis, make everything relate to sex
- Soldier
clean rifle, fire rifle, know about tactics and strategy, sleep whenever you can, stay awake during guard duty
- Clergyman
long-winded, preachy, forgive sinners, sermonize
- University student
Booze it up, chase girls, cram for test

Western

Westerns were a very popular type of Pulp, moving from the Old West to the new, with automobiles and airplanes joining horses as time progressed. Cowboys sometimes crossed over into other genres, visiting the lost worlds of dinosaurs and venturing into space.

- World-weary gunslinger
never refuse a challenge, shoot from the hip, never settle down, drink plenty o' redevye, ride the range
- Singing Cowboy
Followed by unseen musicians, shoot gun from target's hand, train horse to rescue him, helps women and children
- Town Drunk
Cadge drink, sleep in gutter, stagger, annoy bad guys
- Saloon Girl
Have a heart of gold, "Buy a lady a drink, cowboy?", dance with ruffians, unspecified services, fall in love with handsome stranger
- School Marm
Teach local kids and illiterate adults, hide true good looks, be prim and proper
- Sodbuster
Protect ranch, hate cattlemen, hate sheepherders, widower, have beautiful daughter

who's in love with someone you hate

Crime Does Not Pay

Hard-boiled detectives, crime-solving attorneys, gangsters and the like were very popular pulp characters. Many masked adventurers had some kind of background, and the underworld of the criminal sometimes crossed over into the supernatural underworld.

- **Hard-Boiled Private Detective**
broke all the time, never give up on a case, drink gallons of bad coffee, incorruptible, doggedly pursue clues
- **Criminal**
Pistol-whip victims, brutalize victims, take it on the lam, never squeal, plan heist, steal things
- **Reformed Gangster**
Old contacts, streetwise, keep nose clean, frequently suspected by police, not trusted by other crooks
- **Gun Moll**
Heavy makeup, sexy in a cheap and tawdry way, cynical
- **Gangster**
Dark suit with black shirt & white tie, execute squealers, carry out the orders of Mr. Big
- **G-Man**
Agent of FBI/Treasury Dept/Federal Bureau of Narcotics, smoke like a chimney, snappy black suit, trenchcoat,
- **Policeman**
Direct traffic, walk beat, find donuts, drink stale coffee, chase fugitive
- **Police Detective**
Interrogate suspect, deduce, flash badge, drink gallons of stale coffee
- **Lawyer**
Make deal, interrogate, know the law, twist the law, find loophole, "Objection!"
- **Informant**
Know dangerous secrets, trade information for money
- **Fence**
Receive hot property, make deals with crooks

Weird Science

Strange inventions, brains in tanks, rebellious robots, trips to other planets, these types of characters often straddle the razor-edge of science, and flirt with knowledge that man was not meant to flirt with.

- **Jetpack Jockey**
weird helmet and leather jacket, noisy rocket pack, take a running leap, blast off, make a smooth landing, spot things from the sky
- **Alien Princess**
Get kidnapped, fall in love with handsome earthman, scream piercingly, postpone "fate worse than death"
- **Gadgeteer**
fix almost anything but it looks weird, invent half-baked contraptions, put together intricate gadgets out of common objects, stammer and sweat around women
- **Rocket Pilot**
Count backwards, look good in uniform, make command decisions, snappy commands, seek out new worlds, carry out mission
- **Ship's Engineer**
Fix engines, complain about engines, hide still, know every nut and bolt in ship

- Absent-minded professor
forget head if it wasn't attached, invent miraculous but troublesome device or substance, leave isolation chamber doors ajar, accidentally shrink the kids
- Robot
Made o metal, big metal pincers instead of hands, well-concealed "off" button, interpret all conversation literally, go berserk, susceptible to paradoxes

Lost World

Impenetrable jungles, deep caverns, and distant polar reaches are often crawling with representatives of unknown or long-extinct cultures. Often, you will find prehistoric animals such as dinosaurs have survived against all odds.

- Unfrozen Caveman
reminiscing about the Ice Age, hunt for mammoths, unfamiliar with modern world, spooked by modern gadgets, decorate apartment with cave paintings
- Jungle King/Queen
raised by animals, keen sight and smell, great strength and agility, communicate with animals, survive in the wild, swing from vine, wrestle alligator
- Native Princess
Fall in love with handsome explorer, scream piercingly, misinterpret handsome stranger's actions, have strange tribal custom
- Tribesman
Throw spear, bear load, menace outsiders, sucker for cheap trinkets
- Gladiator
Wear antiquated armor, speak Latin, "By Zeus!", net and trident
- Rebellious Slave
Get treated kindly by the outsiders, learn of freedom, rebel against your masters, incite other slaves to rebellion

Villains

Not a Pulp genre unto themselves, villains can be found in almost any other sub-genre (though you don't find very many Oriental Mystics in Westerns).

- Bloodthirsty Fiend
wield axe/knife/noose, surprise victim, hide from pursuers, insanely strong, break into locked rooms
- Sinister Warlord
conquer the world, devise fiendish tortures, utilize exotic devices, create elaborate plots, explain plan to enemy before you kill him, hire henchman without explaining what happened to the dozens of other henchmen you hired, secret escape route, destroy secret base
- Oriental Mystic
Hypnotize do-gooders, be inscrutable, create illusion, quote Confucius and Lao Tsu
- Snivelling Toady
Cringe and kowtow before the Master, fulfill his bidding to the letter, apprehend hero's girlfriend, menace droolingly, inadvertently give away the Master's plans, bungle job

Weird Stories

Tales of strange monsters, eerie settings, nightmares, hauntings, and the occult. H.P. Lovecraft was a master of this form, and his close friends Clark Ashton Smith, R.E. Howard, and Richard Bloch were but a few who followed him into this strange realm. Florian Edelbauer's "Risus R'lyeh" page at <http://www.edlbauer.de/risus/rlyeh.html> is a good source for this kind of adventure.

- Ghost Chaser
Know all about ghosts, set up cameras to catch ghosts on film, disprove fake ghosts,

- get rid of real ghosts
- Occult Scholar
Know weird phenomena, remember strange names, find ancient incantation
- Bookshop owner
Obtain obscure titles, dust shelves, know where any book in the shop is, know what's in all the books
- Antiquarian
Quote from obscure authors, know obscure facts, cite reference
- Librarian
Sort books, find newspaper articles, shh!, find obscure information, repair books
- Anthropologist
Know aboriginal folktales, know tribal customs, eat disgusting things, speak obscure languages

Masked Crusaders

Solving unusual crimes or unraveling bizarre mysteries, Masked Crusaders are the predecessors of the superhero. Though usually possessed of great strength and cunning, they may also have a strange, signature power (like the ability to cloud men's minds or immunity to pain) or a special gadget (anaesthetic dart gun, smoke grenades).

- Masked Adventurer
wear strange costume, foil dastardly crime, track criminal to lair, duke it out, escape from certain death, protect secret identity, drive flashy vehicle, send clueless assistants on senseless tasks, rescue clueless assistants
- Clueless Assistant
Perform senseless tasks for masked adventurer, wonder about senseless tasks, blunder into traps

PULP CAMPAIGN IDEAS

The Odysseus League

Not a typical social club, the Odysseus League's members all have one thing in common: they have all survived a shipwreck by their own wits and luck. Members are required to take some kind of journey once a year. Typical exploits involve oriental warlords, lost empires, mysteries of nature, secret agents, and criminal geniuses.

Friends of Prometheus

Who is "Prometheus"? No one seems to know, but he has rescued each of his "friends" from blackmail, torture, and worse. In exchange, they act as his arms, his legs, his eyes in his war against crime and terror. Perhaps he is even one of them!

Adventures in Science

Professor G. Gordon Genius is at it again! His giant computers tried to take over the world. His rocket ship stranded you on the Planet Just Around the Corner. His indestructible robot ran amuck. What can possibly go wrong this time?