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Risus of Arabia

Risus of Arabia 3.0

Risus: the Anything RPG, © S. John Ross 1993-2001 <http://www222.pair.com/sjohn/risus.htm>

"First principles, Clarice. Simplicity. Read Marcus Aurelius. Of each particular thing ask: what is it in itself? What is its nature?"
Hannibal Lecter

To avoid problems, long ago we started using Fate in place of God or Allah. Monotheism is a must, there are other beliefs, but there is only one True Faith.

For simplicity's sake, the characters are generic Islamic Arab. The era is 'The Golden Age of the Islamic Empire'. All other races, creeds, nationalities are fit only for villains or comic relief.

If you are going to lift from RPG resources on the web; lean toward Supernatural Pulp, rather than High Fantasy.

Traditionally The Nights or centered on the reign of Harun al-Rashid (caliph 786 - 809), I center my setting about 900, when the Abbasid caliphate is in full decline and petty emirs are staking out big chunks of the Islamic empire for themselves; inciting civil wars, border skirmishes, and palace intrigues. The empire stretches from the lower half of Spain, along the coast of Africa, a few Mediterranean islands, the Middle East, down the East African coast to Zanzibar; along the coast of India, Indo-china, to the Spice Islands.

Politically, Autocrats are the rule. And in these troubled times, adventurers find great opportunities traveling the dangerous lands and seas between the great cities of the Lands of Fate.

Setting Cliches

Jinns in bottles on the beach.

Flying carpet careening through the minaret crowned skyline of Baghdad.

Lost cities in the sands of trackless deserts.

Dancing girls in diaphanous harem clothes.

A dhow in full sail on the seven seas.

Cliches for the various lands of the Land of Fate.

Maghreb (Saharan Africa): Powerful Berber Mages, Salt caravans, Timbuktu, Barbary pirates, Algiers, Morocco, Casablanca

Egypt: Tombs, tombs, tombs, barging down the Nile, Nubian gold mines, (Egypt is, historically, the center of the Arab world)

Abyssinia (East Africa): King Solomon's Mines, the slave trade, She Who Must Be Obeyed, Mountains of the Moon.

Arabia: riding camels, sailing Dhows, resting in oases, sand swept ruins of lost civilizations.

Persia: Like Arabia, only with mountains.

Anatolia (Turkey): Like Persia, only on the Mediterranean Sea.

India: Ornate temples of Doom, jungles, the Ganges, Thugges.

Spice Islands: old men who like piggyback rides, headhunters.

Al-Andalus: Arabic Spain. The height of urban sophistication almost constantly at war with the Franks.

Risus of Arabia Adventure Seeds

Several themes: "powerful demon stories, talisman stories where a magical object protects and guides the hero, quest stories, transformation tales, and tales of demons under restraint"

The two main travel motivators in The Nights are to find treasure or break an enchantment; the usual RPG 'need and greed seeds'.

I defer to The Big List of RPG Plots by S. John Ross. <http://www.io.com/~sjohn/plots.htm>

Risus of Arabia characters.

Characters are built on ten dice.

Options at the GM's whim. The only inappropriate option is Funky Dice.

The Hand of Fate awarded by play involving the Five Pillars of Islam; HoF points are the same as Cool points or Fate/Hero points, they are pooled for the group and a point must be given by a gamer to another gamer.

Characters should be mindful of Family, Honor, Hospitality, and Piety. This is another way to get single use Cool points

The merchant/adventurer or young prince/princess (noble) are staples. Remember The Nights is set in a mercantile culture.

Merchant/adventurers, by sea or land.

Scholar, occult or otherwise

Caravan outrider, usually an ex-soldier

Dancing girl, usually a sneak thief

Professional treasure hunter

Dervish, a sufi monk

Sufi, an Islamic mystic

Young Noble, looking for gold, glory, or to reclaim a birthright.

Alchemist

Summoner

Former Desert Bandit

Retired Thuggee

Kabbalist, any mage cliché can use kabbalism, this is the master class.

Fakir is a tall dark and handsome manly man. He is always on the move. Good with pack animals and horses; not so good with people.

Hook: Bad Case of Wanderlust. Pathological Need for 'Me' Time.

Tale: He grew up fast in the streets and alleys of Baghdad. His survival mentality is built around 'keep moving and trust no one'. Stowed away on a ship and has been moving ever since.

Taciturn Caravan Outrider (4) was an Agile and Cunning Street Urchin (3) and Is now a Well Traveled Dilettante Scholar (2) which allows him Universal Mage Abilities.

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Princess Shalimar / Taura

Hook: Price on Her Head. Secret Identity. Compulsive Thief

Tale: She is a gypsy princess who fled her tribe because a traditionally evil uncle usurped power and wants to a) marry her off to some halfwit cousin, b) kill her off so he can take over. She was taken in by a group of traveling gypsies where she learned her trades. She uses her dance and social skills to locate loot and the best means to gain said loot.

Little Nell's Dancing Girl: 'Lithe of limb, light of touch, and fleet of foot.' She is a renowned dancer with the ability to enthrall men as if they had drunk deeply of wine. She is also a gifted thief, pickpocket, con artist, and gambling cheat.

Wily Gypsy Peasant (4) which allows her Universal Mage Abilities, Stunning Gypsy Princess (3), Itinerant Bon Vivant (2).

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(yes, Gypsies aren't milieu appropriate; Little Nell didn't understand what a Berber was.)

Risus of Arabia Magic

In The Nights, powerful sorcerers were trumped by Fate or cunning; and a butcher's daughter was learned in enchantments. Magic is useful, and accessible; but not overwhelming. This magic is more enchantment than spell flinging. For a taste of magic from the Tales read the Three Kalandar Tales, particularly Second Kalandar's Tale.

Magic is a facet of everyday, sidewalk astrologers and geomancers, charms for sale in every market, shops that sell anything a mage would need. Only two restrictions: No mind control spells and no specifically offensive spells. However spells can be used offensively. Most magic falls into the bind, summon, invoke, ward, or banish categories. Other options are a spellflinger conversion list or the Fudge "Four-by-Five" Magic System by Steffan O'Sullivan.

Game changing alchemist/magic objects can be handled like the 'Gizmo' advantage for the Gadgeteer in GURPS Cliffhangers; devices, objects, and equipment are prepared before hand and can fill only five of the ten regular Gear Slots, A set number of rings, vials, flasks, amulets, etc... are not committed before a session, but are committed once they come into play; however the uncommitted slot must be named 'ring, vial, flask, amulet, etc... One ring/talisman and one necklace/amulet can be 'at the ready' for a PC, each costs a Gear Slot. A necklace can be always 'on', say a ward or light glyph - a ring must be commanded. Charms can provide spell-like abilities and non-cliché skills for a chosen cliché.

Summoner or Alchemist is taken as the cliché - augury and letter magic default as skills in either. Both Summoner and Alchemist clichés can be taken but only one can be double pumped. The division between Summoner and Alchemist was a personal preference; it was done solely to diffuse mage power. Magic for both requires a casting round; being 'combat ready' is tricky for a mage, so it's a good for a mage to have a trick, or two, up his or her sleeve. While mages can have passable to excellent combat skills, mesmerism is a skill at the ready, and a demon/jinn bound to a talisman is good to go.

For game purposes, jinns, as a rule, don't do physical combat. Few are actual mages, they use their innately abilities to perform 'magical' tasks, such as fly, passwall, shape-shift, etc... Higher level jinns can cast spells and enchantments. Demons, due to their less magical nature, are more suited for combat and physical tasks. And no, jinns and demons can't be summoned at the same time. Questing Dice can be tied to the Summoner cliché,

Note: Demons are only vaguely referred to in The Nights; and the souls of the departed are in the hands of Allah, so no séances or ghosts or ghosts-

like apparitions. Spirits are mentioned in The Night, these are animistic hold-overs from pre-Muslim Arab beliefs.

Alchemy: potions, elixirs, devices, acids, explosives, tear gas, transmuting stuff, animating statues, make and use The Philosopher's Stone, create homunculi and golems, etc...

Sample potions: heroism, speed, strength, healing, flash vial, paralyzation, polymorph, cure disease, regeneration..... As well as powders for illusions and invisibility. As mentioned in The Queen of the Serpents, the herbalism in the Night would be familiar to European apothecaries.

Demons, jinn, golems. etc gain the Sidekick bonus when the creator/caster burns a Lucky Die, It can be use inconjunction with the three dice bonus, or as a stand alone entity with the 3 dice alone. for example: an Alchemist (3) creates a golem, they can act in concert as Golem (3) or if the alchemist burns a bonus die they become Golem (6) to crush enemies and smash doors. Or the golem can be left to solo duties as Golem (3).

Universal Mage Abilities (see Risus Magic by Jason Puckett and S. John Ross)

- Sensing magic items upon seeing or touching them
- Sensing other wizards on sight
- Sensing other wizards nearby, whether or not they're visible ("I feel a disturbance in the Force...")
- Sensing spells cast nearby
- Detecting the nature (necromancy, fire magic, good/evil/hostile/friendly magic) of magic items or spells in the area
- Dispelling other mages' spells *
- etc.

* Dispelling an enchantment is a regular theme in The Nights, often involving time, effort, and travel. There is also a tacit 'hands off' agreement among all magic user, both Humans and Jinns. There is a tenuous connection between the caster and the enchantment so he or she knows when it is being tampered with. It also serves as an automatic Lojack for magic objects until the enchantment is cloaked, altered, or broken. Also a door can be given a slight enchantment to act as a silent alarm (a variation of Magic Mouth).

Also:

Augury: Astrology/Geomancy (sand writing, akin to reading tea leaves), ask the oracle simple questions ... (a shameless tool for the GM to use)

Letter Magic. - wards and glyphs, making amulets (protective) and talismans (empowering) to control the elements (not elemental spirits), control the weather, talk to animals, draw magic circles, create illusions, write home for help ... (necessary for making magic objects) Letter magic can be written or chanted (the 'intelligible words' often spoken in The Nights) Letter magic is fundamental to magic in The Nights.

(Note: Enchantment, Illusions, and Shapeshifting are covered by a second tier of Letter Magic difficulty. We still need to suss out a few rules.)

(Note: illusions are just trickery, the sort minor jinn engage in to mislead humans.No mind control involved.)

Wards and glyphs can be traced on walls or doors to make barriers or traps; flash, stun, confuse, enthrall, etc... At higher levels letters can be traced in the air and cast like runes.

(Note: Sleep is milieu passable; Charm, Suggestion, and other mind control spells are not.)

(Note: I don't remember if mesmerism is a part of The Nights; however, jinns could work illusions, mirages, and hallucinations; but not direct mind control, that would preclude free will. Mesmerism was included in the earlier incarnation of this game as a concession to a player who wanted an 'always ready' wammy.)

Universal Mage Abilities can be a skill in an appropriate cliché: a Gypsy Princess, Gypsy Peasant, Occult Scholar, etc... with adjusted TNs.

There is a Spellflinger conversion chart; most 'classic' spells can be replicated with this system – the point is to have a broader use of magic. To cover the biggest bugbear, there are no Magic Missiles, Fireballs, Webs, or the like. Cure Wounds or Cure Disease are handled through other skills.

Augury covers ESP, Clairvoyance

Letter Magic covers: Light, Protection from Evil, Hold Portal, Shield (detailed rules), Wizard Lock...

The frequent polymorph spells used in the Nights may be a form of a glamor spell. Anyone with 'some small learning in the arts' can see the polymorphed character's true form.

Risus of Arabia Bestiary

As for 'ghoulies, and ghosties and long-legged beasties, and things that go bump in the night'?

Ghuls seem to be a genus of ogre, ghosts don't exist in this cosmology, references to spirits are most likely animistic spirits, a hold over pagan Arab beliefs. Long-legged beasties and thing that go bump in the night are hold overs from the regions rich and varied pagan/heathen pasts. There is also a

strong Greco-Roman theme to the bestiary.

Types of monsters.

Hybrids: Half and halves like centaurs or Nagas and/or chimeras – beasts of many parts.

Melds: a Moreau-esque manimals, werewolves, lizardmen etc....

BTL: Bigger than life. Large or giant creatures.

There are no undead in The Nights or Egyptian mythology. The mummy's curse was a product Victorian England.

In the first and second incarnation demons were based on the Persian, Hindu, and Egyptian pantheons, demons are minor aspects of the deities, mini avatars. Bear in mind the Cthulhu rule of thumb that the older the diety the more powerful it is.

Nagas

Base Cliché: (3) slithering, listening to reedy music, hypnotizing birds....

Notes: bite, claw, whip with tail.

Can lunge.

Slow reptilian brain.

Tastes the air over short distances, heat sense.

Half man half snake, usually solo.

Anubins.

Base Cliché: (2) running in packs, having a 'Day', using curved bladed weapons.

Notes: Jackelmen as from 'The Mummy Returns'.

Sand Snake: Large snake (4)

Notes: Surprise attack

A really impressive hood.

Ambush hunter

General notes on Jinn.

They were created from smokeless fire (humans were created from clay) . They have a parallel society, marry, have families, hold slaves, and have jobs. They can pass for human, have sex with humans, and have the same emotional range as humans; though being created from fire, they are more passionate. Not all jinns are mages, but can perform magic like tasks due to their physical nature. The most common abilities are shapeshifting, illusions, fly, element control, talk to animals, and pass through walls. All are dependent on the jinn's class and power.

Jinn are beings of flame or air that are capable of assuming human or animal form and are said to dwell in all conceivable inanimate objects—stones, trees, ruins—underneath the earth, in the air, and in fire. They possess the bodily needs of human beings and can even be killed, but they are free from all physical restraints. Jinn delight in punishing humans for any harm done them, intentionally or unintentionally, and are said to be responsible for many diseases and all kinds of accidents; however, those human beings knowing the proper magical procedure can exploit the jinn to their advantage.

Treasure

Rings or books or charms related to King Solomon. Or something with a biblical feel.

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